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A Website Peddling Girls for Sex

Progress in curtailing Backpage as a medium for sex trafficking.

[**From page A2**](javascript:void(0)) As a 16-year-old high school sophomore living in Boston, Asia Graves was sold on the internet “like a pizza,” she recalls, handed over to be raped by strange men every day.

Along with thousands of other girls, she was sold through what amounts to an online brothel called Backpage. It dominates the online sex trade and is implicated in almost three-quarters of the reports of child trafficking in the United States.

Yet this week offers a moment to celebrate. Under political and legal pressure, Backpage on Monday closed its “adult” advertising section, used to peddle women and children for sex. There’s also an overdue effort to hold its executives criminally and civilly liable.

“There’s been a lot of progress,” notes Graves, who eventually escaped her pimp — but only after he gouged her face with a potato peeler and stomped on her, breaking her jaw. She was cheering this week as a Senate subcommittee held hearings on Backpage and discussed tightening the law on websites like it.

I’ve been writing about sex trafficking since the 1990s, because at its worst it’s an echo of slavery. It’s also a topic rife with hypocrisy. We denounced the Catholic Church and Penn State for tolerating child sexual abuse, but we have collectively tolerated websites like Backpage that sell children for sex.

That has steadily been changing. Credit card companies stopped processing payments for ads in Backpage, undermining its business model. Kamala Harris, then California’s attorney general and now its new senator, filed criminal charges in December against Backpage executives, with arraignment scheduled for this month. Civil suits in Washington State against Backpage are proceeding. A film about trafficking, “I Am Jane Doe,” opens in theaters next month and shines a light on Backpage as “the Walmart of human trafficking.”

Most important, a Senate subcommittee, led by Rob Portman, a Republican, and Claire McCaskill, a Democrat, has done outstanding work investigating Backpage and showing how it achieved a valuation of more than half a billion dollars by working with human traffickers.

A devastating new subcommittee report shows that the company protects pimps from their carelessness by deleting hints that a girl is underage. For example, if a pimp tries to post an ad for a “Lolita,” “little girl,” “school girl” or “amber alert,” those terms are automatically stripped from the ad — but it is still posted, so the girl will still be sold for sex.

One Backpage document indicated that by 2010, more than 70 percent of its ads in the adult section were being edited like that, suggesting that the company was far more involved in manipulating content than it ever let on.

Sure, some people selling sex are adults acting on their own to make money, and that’s not a concern of mine. If Backpage carefully verified names and ages, I’d be fine with that. But Backpage has more stringent rules for selling a dog than for selling a kid.

I’ve written repeatedly about Backpage over the years because the stories haunt me. My first column about Backpage involved a 13-year-old girl whom I called Baby Face. Her pimp had kicked her down a stairwell for trying to flee, and she was hurting and bleeding and couldn’t bear another rape, but her pimp sold her on Backpage anyway. He took her to an apartment building and waited outside after telling her which apartment to go to.

Terrified and desperate, Baby Face instead pounded on the door of a different apartment. When a surprised woman answered, Baby Face asked for a phone and called her mom and then 911. Her pimp went to prison, but Backpage simply profited from the sale, as it always has.

Look, human trafficking is a complicated issue. If Backpage is put out of business, other websites may fill the void, and indeed, when Backpage closed its adult section, ads selling sex immediately moved over to the site’s dating section.

We need Congress to amend the Communications Decency Act to clarify that companies like Backpage don’t get protections when they permit pimps to sell kids on their websites. There is a mounting bipartisan effort to pass such an amendment, and I hope President-elect Donald Trump will show leadership on this as well. We also need local police departments and prosecutors to go after pimps and johns, rather than sometimes targeting the children who are the victims.

One mom, Nacole (she didn’t want her full name used to protect her family’s privacy), told me how her 15-year-old daughter was sold for more than three months on Backpage.

“How could such a horrific, morally bankrupt business model find success in America?” she asked at the Senate hearing. She said her daughter had been advertised on the website as a ‘Weekend Special.’ ”

It’s too late to protect that girl, who is still struggling to recuperate. But when children are sold for sex online as weekend specials, they’re not the ones who should be ashamed. We all should be.