

CEP Magazine – February 2020

Private sector heroes: Fighting modern slavery through compliance

By Matt Friedman

Matt Friedman (matt.friedman@themekongclub.org) is CEO of The Mekong Club in Hong Kong.

In early December 2018, I traveled to Washington, DC, to attend the American Bankers Association (ABA) Financial Crimes Enforcement Conference. As an anti-human trafficking expert, I was invited to participate in two panel discussions focusing on the issue of modern slavery and the banking sector. Following the second session, one of the bankers came up to me and told the following story.

Three years ago, this person and his family were traveling across several states in America by car to meet up with relatives. Following a long drive, he pulled into a small motel off the highway. Because it had been a long journey, his wife and two teenage daughters felt tired. That evening he went out to get some food for the family. As he was coming back to the motel, he noticed this very young teenage girl being pulled into a room with an older man. He said he remembered she had such a sad, frightened expression across her face. He knew immediately what was about to happen—she was a young sex worker about to be used by this patron. Since he had daughters of his own around the same age, he felt he needed to do something to help.

After dropping off the food, he went to the motel manager and told her what he saw. He then returned to his room not knowing if anything would happen. Twenty minutes later, there was a police car parked in front of the room. Ten minutes after that, he saw someone being taken out in handcuffs. The young girl was escorted to another car and driven away.

He said he remembered this event because he felt so good that he was able to help this young girl out of this terrible situation. In fact, he went on to say that this was a major milestone in his life—something he felt very proud of.

After hearing his story, I asked him what he did for a living. He described that he was a compliance officer focusing on anti-money laundering for one of the major American banks. I asked him if they did work related to the issue of modern slavery. He said they were just getting started in this area; that was why he came to the session. He went on to say that he felt his job was not very exciting and wasn't sure how much difference it was making.

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