

Interview: Raised in Pimp City: Urban insights on traffickers, trafficking, and the counter-trafficking industry

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Armand King was involved in human trafficking¹ for over a decade. The journal Editor, Borislav Gerasimov, and the Special Issue Guest Editor, Marika McAdam, conducted this interview with him to better understand his motivations and experiences during this period of his life as well as his views on counter-trafficking.²

Borislav Gerasimov: Can you tell us about your experience with trafficking?

Armand King: My experience started around 1997-98, when I was 16 years old going on 17. I'm from San Diego, California, from an impoverished and marginalised community of primarily Black and brown individuals. When I started, this was the cool thing to do in my peer group. Most of the people I knew, both girls and guys, were merged into this lifestyle together. Before that, there was heavy gang involvement, Bloods and Crips, and before that there was a government-induced Black Plague, we call it the crack epidemic, where drugs were forced on our communities by government officials, by the CIA... The system had pushed drugs which was the beginning of how we got into trafficking. We

¹ Technically, Armand was a prostitution facilitator, or a 'pimp'. However, this activity is considered as 'sex trafficking' under the United States *Trafficking Victims Protection Act* of 2000 and Armand identifies as having been involved in 'domestic urban sex trafficking'.

² The interview was conducted on 16 July 2021 (15 July in Armand's time zone) over Zoom. It was recorded, transcribed, and edited for brevity and clarity by the Editors. The edited transcript was sent to Mr King for approval before publication. The recording was deleted after this process.

were already in a bad state as a community forced into poverty, red-lining, all of these different things and I'm just a product of that. My generation came from parents who were heavily impacted by the war on drugs, by gang involvement... And without any solutions or opportunities or resources being brought in, we didn't know what to do.

Trafficking was a new term for us; we called it pimping and prostitution then. And it was okayed by the media, by the music we were listening to, by our moms even. We were 16-17-year-old boys and girls—you don't really understand life, you don't understand what you're doing. We saw pimping and prostitution on the HBO special *Pimps Up, Ho's Down*. I was a kid and we came home from school and watched this at 3 pm in the afternoon, and it just sparked us—we saw Black men and women that were prosperous, or at least to a 16-year-old boy they looked happy. Now as a 40-year-old man, they look miserable. But as a 16-year-old boy you don't understand life; none of my friends had fathers, we did not have a positive male role model in our life. All the men in my community were pimps, drug dealers, and gang members. So we didn't feel what we were doing was wrong. You know something's not right but we did not think like the way it is now, like 'evil trafficker, burn him at the stake' and all that. No, we were actually accepted by our communities, our mothers benefited off of what we were doing, and they were happy we weren't drug dealers or gang members. And you didn't see a bunch of beat-up women, like those images nowadays—no, you saw women with Gucci bags and nice dresses driving Lexus or Mercedes. So, on the outside it seemed good but actually we were damaging ourselves but nobody was there to tell us that.

And we had a code of conduct, we had ethics. It was passed down since the 70s and it was, we used to say, 'by choice not force'. Not that people were not hit or abused, but we didn't look at that as a good thing. I've never hit a woman in my life and I was involved in 'the game' for over 10 years. And if you had to hit a woman, if you could not just use your mouth, your communication skills—this is what is now called 'coercion', so it fits in there—but if you couldn't do that and you had to put your hands on a woman, you were known as a weak man. We would say 'it's not a contact sport, hands behind your back, we promote peace'.

In that community where I was from you weren't allowed to have minors—if you had a minor, you would have got beat up. It did happen, but these people were the exception, not the rule, and they stayed quiet, because they would be exiled. One of my friends that I grew up with just got a charge for having a 14-year-old girl and he's been banished from the city—his best friends, his crew, they will not talk to him. He lives across the country right now because his reputation is damaged. That's how far we go with this minor stuff.

BG: Were you prosecuted or convicted, and if so, for what crimes?

AK: Everybody in law enforcement knew it was happening and nobody cared—it wasn't a target item. If you weren't a gang member or a drug dealer, they didn't care about you. Police and law enforcement were dating the girls and, if not paying, they were raping them. We used to even say that what we were doing was the lesser evil. Because we lived under gang members and people were literally killing each other, behind a colour they were wearing or a street name. So we came from that and right before that, we came from strung-out aunties, parents, we were the crack babies, and we watched that destroy our community. So what we were doing was actually getting money, people were dressing nice, had nice cars and not just us but the girls we were with it. It seemed like the better of the very few options we had.

But yes, I went to federal prison, I did three years of probation. I have two felonies now but not for trafficking—I was in there for cannabis which is now legal in the United States and rich people are getting richer off of it, and I can't enter the industry because I have a felony for the same thing they're getting rich off of. So, a whole lot of sense is being made with this American system that we claim to be better. For 10 pounds I did three years in prison—first time ever been in trouble with the law.

But they didn't care about trafficking or pimping, it was a slap on the wrist. That's why we thought it was the best thing for us to do. For gangbanging you would go to jail, you could die; selling drugs—you will go to jail forever.

Marika McAdam: You use the term 'pimp'—can you explain what, in your view, is the difference between a trafficker and a pimp?

AK: Now that I've been in this movement since 2014, the two are interchangeable. Had you asked me or another pimp before if they were a trafficker, they would have said 'hell no! Those are people who are out of this country and are bringing in foreign women in tankers'. We would think something like that, like the movie *Taken*. That would be a trafficker. Or a drug trafficker smuggling in people, and we were like, no these are the girls that are just as poor as me, grew up with me, and this is our way to make money to survive. That would have been my definition before, just a pimp, a manager. And it wasn't a bad thing—girls were looking for a pimp, they would not even mess with you if you weren't a pimp.

And then you have every rapper possible and those weren't just the guys' influences, they were the girls' influences too. We had Snoop Dogg—internationally known, worldwide respected—he went from a gangster rapper to all of a sudden, a pimp rapper. And so did a lot of other people. That was like validation, that's what you wanted to achieve and to be. A pimp was not a bad word. And I believe that's a lot of the reason why the terminology changed to trafficker. And they don't

use the word pimp anymore. Pimp was an easy pill to swallow—you had MTV ‘Pimp My Ride’, you had Nelly, ‘Pimp Juice’, you had Jay-Z with ‘Big Pimpin’... We had pimping even in rich socioeconomic communities and it wasn’t a bad word anywhere.

The term changed around 2012. I found out in 2014 about this trafficking stuff and I was like ‘What is that? Oh, that’s what it is!’ Before that, if you got arrested, it was pimping and pandering, now you don’t really hear that anymore, it’s human trafficking charges you’re getting. So you hear human trafficking and it is just so hard, it doesn’t sit right with you. But if I heard ‘a gang member was trafficking minors’—I’d be like, kill him! I don’t even need to hear the story or know what the situation was—if I just heard gangster, trafficker, minor—kill him!

The terminology changed so the mind would change. And now they started going after those same Black people they used to target. Police used to call us by our pimp names on the blade, on the tracks, they knew who we were and they would pull us over. They knew what was going on, but their marching orders weren’t to arrest us. If they didn’t find drugs or guns or you weren’t on some type of supervision from law enforcement, they’d let you go. Even that was like a path validation—the police don’t even care. Keep going, you’re making a thousand dollars a night, why stop?

BG: Do you think that trafficking for sexual exploitation should be treated differently to other forms of trafficking?

AK: There are many different forms of trafficking. And unfortunately, the human trafficking movement puts them all into one box, and that alone is preventing us from coming up with solutions because there may be some similarities here and there, but they’re totally different. There’s familial trafficking, child trafficking, international trafficking.. Where I come from is primarily, you know, the Black community that you’ll see with stereotypical pimps from the streets.

And let me start off with saying I’m only an expert at the type of trafficking I was involved in—domestic urban human trafficking that comes from inner city communities in America and in Canada. So why I say they need to be dealt with differently is because I’ve been around enough to hear the problems, and other forms of trafficking, and they’re totally different from the problems that I come from. I know how to address this problem of urban domestic trafficking, but those same solutions would not be applied to familial trafficking, for example. The bulk of the solutions for the trafficking I come from is about poverty reduction. Ending poverty, giving more opportunity and resources to these kids that are still getting involved—that would change the whole dynamics. It’s not that the pimp or the prostitute want to do this. They may try to trick themselves later to make it okay but when they’re 10, 11, 12 years old, their ambition is not to be a pimp or a prostitute—something in their life path made that avenue seem okay.

And if they weren't coming from these impoverished marginalised communities, impacted by systemic racism and white supremacy, if they had other options, they would have done something else. Now in these communities, kids are trying other things. My generation, we didn't have older pimps to look at and think 'oh that's bad, that's wrong'. We saw drugs and we thought 'yeah we're not doing that', we saw gangs and 'oh yeah, we're not doing that'. But we didn't see the pimp and prostitution culture, we actually brought that in. Now you have kids that are 14-15 that do have a whole generation to look at, and they're like 'hell no'. There are some still going that route just like there are some selling drugs... our biggest problem now is kids dying off drugs, the opioid epidemic is killing us. And we still have gangs... All those issues are stemming from the root problems of poverty, racism, and lack of opportunities.

MM: There are different views in the international counter-trafficking community about whether sex work should be criminalised, decriminalised, or legalised. What is your view and why?

AK: I don't know. I've been in these debates. I've heard both sides, and I can hear one person who makes a good argument and I'm in agreement, and then someone else on the opposite side makes good arguments, and I'm in agreement. Personally, I don't know what's better. I have friends that are still in the game today, they don't have a pimp or anything, and they're not okay. No one wants to do this, you know, but they're in it.

I have home girls who are pushing for legalisation. I have one friend, she has several degrees from San Diego State University, doing a PhD right now. She was in for 14 years and now she's just a scholar and she's pro-sex work. And we have great debates about it, she's a debater. But personally, I don't know, my fight is to save lives and help people from even going down that path so we don't have to debate about it.

Selling your body should never even be an option on the table but unfortunately it is. And until we end poverty, which unfortunately is one of the biggest problems ever, there's always going to be someone who realises, 'I can sell my body'. Even women who aren't 'prostitutes' or sex workers, may have a guy that's paying their rent or are going out with him just because he's giving them financial benefits. It's an exchange, and it's based in poverty, in need. To answer your question, I don't have a stance.

BG: What do you think is an appropriate punishment for the kinds of activities you were engaged in, which are now called trafficking? Is it jail time, or something else in addition to, or instead of, jail time?

AK: First of all, who's the one to say what an appropriate punishment is for what someone else does? I don't know any person who's never done anything

wrong and which wrong is more wrong than the other wrong? Who's casting that opinion? Only God can judge me.

Like I said, I've never hit a woman. I called myself the businessman pimp—I would sit down with a piece of paper and we would draw out the plan. Poor guy, poor girl, this is what we're going to do. If the girl said yes then we move forward. If she said no, then okay—someone else may say yes. The last time I was in the game, I had stopped already, and a girl came and got me. Should she get punished for getting me into the game? These days I know more girls that get guys into the game to be their pimp, they call it boyfriend-girlfriend pimping. Should those girls be punished? It's not my place to say. I've gone to prison, you know, because of this plant that grows from the ground, but God might have put me in prison to sit down and think about other things. I've lost many of my friends, they're dead right now. Last week a friend of mine was pimping on the blade in Houston, Texas, and was shot in the head by a girl pimp.

I don't know how much more punishment, and who is that person or entity that's to cast punishment, definitely not the United States of America, this country that I stand in right now, which is stolen land: there were people that lived here that you don't even see anymore, they were annihilated. They were put in concentration camps that they still live on, and are forced to watch America grow as they're impoverished. The number one trafficked women in America are Indigenous women that don't even get headlines, they don't even get talked about, right? African, Black people were brought over here, to this country. This country was founded on labour and sex trafficking. So who's making these laws that are to be punished by—the person that brought us here, the largest kidnapper, rapist, and trafficker ever known to man, is that the person that's casting my punishment?

So, to answer your question, the punishment that I should receive is punishment I've got enough of, and only God can judge me. We talk a lot but he hasn't shown me where my metre is, if my good has outweighed my bad yet. But my life right now is dedicated towards helping others—women that were in the game. The first girl I've ever seen, first ever trick, she works for my organisation now. She was there for 20 years, you know, saved her life. So, hopefully I've turned the tables around and I'm actually on the good side.

MM: You're currently working to prevent trafficking. Counter-trafficking is so much about victims and how to address vulnerability to being victimised, but not how we address vulnerability to becoming a trafficker. What is your approach, what are your key messages and to whom?

AK: When I started, people were asking me, why are you helping traffickers? And I tell them, if I can prevent a 'trafficker', a pimp, and change them, I may have saved a hundred women. There are multiple ways we do that as an organisation—the middle schools, preteens, that is the most crucial age group to reach to prevent

them from going into ‘the life’; we call that the ‘wannabe’ stage. So, we have a class for them to talk and to train them before they even go down that path. For the ones that are in, we reach out to them—male and female—we have two different programmes, and we show them they have other options.

My biggest tool to prevent somebody and get them out is, I tell them that when I was in the game you might have got a slap on the wrist. Now, you might get 50 years for just posting wrong on Facebook, for talking about pimping. You don’t even have to actually have a victim; you could just talk about it on social media and get a charge. So, showing them that makes them think twice, or at least they know that with this path, you can go to jail forever.

It’s about providing opportunities and we had to build as an organisation, to be able to provide opportunities and resources to keep someone from going into this life, and we’ve been extremely successful with both boys and girls. It’s prevention. And providing other options. Where I grew up, you didn’t see other things you could do—you know they exist but you don’t believe in yourself. We’ve been put into this place before I was born. It’s a generational curse. It was forced on our DNA. And it’s rooted in slavery. We were taught that we were nothing, worthless, we don’t even see ourselves as anything other than low-lives. It’s been pressed on us by media, it’s been pushed on us since we were born... So maybe I know I could be a doctor, I know it’s possible for me to be a lawyer, but I don’t believe that’s for me, I believe I can only do what’s in this box—selling drugs, pimping, gangbanging, nothingness.

In my community, we’re dealing with the remnants of something that was pushed on us. And then who do you blame? If somebody turns off the light in the room and I trip and fall and break something, do you blame the person that tripped and fell and broke something or do you blame the person that turned the lights out in the first place? My job is to unveil and take that blindfold off and show other opportunities. And it’s hard. It’s a fight because this has been for generations.

It’s well documented: we literally had the head of our FBI, J Edgar Hoover, who was strategically in the 70s going after Black leadership and killing them—in his own words and writing—looking to stop the next Black Messiah. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Black Panther movement, strategically taken out when we had an empowerment movement coming. This was system-left kids in the streets. Then we have this emergence of Bloods and Crips and magical drugs that just appear; crack cocaine—there has yet to be a documentary where you see a Black man or woman that owned a plane or train bringing in this massive amount of cocaine. But I do know of the CIA bringing it in, I do know of Nixon allowing this to come in—the biggest drug dealer ever.

We’ve had horrible presidents—Reagan, Bush, Trump. You asked about punishment—who’s gonna punish *them* for what they did? Now we have an

opioid epidemic blowing up right now—where’s that coming from? We have the United States military... when I was in the military, my recruiter said ‘when you go to Panama, there’s going to be a line of women at the barracks you could just date’. Who’s the trafficker, who’s the buyer? Buyers are not being targeted at all, because you’re going to get judges, senators, businessmen—you got to be able to afford sex, to be a buyer, and that’s not us, that’s not the poor people of this country. The poor are the ones selling it.

BG: You spoke a lot about racism, lack of economic opportunities, and other structural issues. What should governments do, what should NGOs do, in your opinion, to reduce trafficking?

AK: Multiple things. One is to listen to the people who actually went through it. Not that everybody that’s been through it needs to be a leader or a speaker, you know, but there are leaders out there that have lived experience—listen to them.

For prevention, we have to reach the kids, we have to reach them before they get into it. And not sugar-coat stuff; especially in this day and age, they need to know it raw, because if you give it to them in baby language, they’re going to go on YouTube and have 1,000 other people tell them the other stuff. So, tell them the real stuff so they’ll know what they’re facing and not get blindsided when they go out there.

And create opportunities and resources. Like I said earlier, we have to end poverty. If we put a dent on poverty, we’ll put a dent on trafficking—nobody wants to be a pimp or a prostitute when they grow up, nobody. And as long as that option is still on the table for poor people, they’re going to use it, whether they have a ‘trafficker’ or not, there’s going to be a woman that sells her body or a man that sells his body, or finds a way to sell this other person’s body for money because that’s all we are left with.

I’ve been around a lot of trained professors, trained law enforcement, we’ve had productive group meetings with scholars and with people with lived experience who are given the information. I’m so tired of giving that information. Nothing is happening with it. It’s 2021! I got in this movement in 2014, the ball hasn’t moved an inch. No offence to you guys, but I’m still answering the same questions, we’re still talking about the gaps in services... Come on! There’s been answers forever and not just with this. I’ve been listening to Tupac addressing every social issue we have, with the problem and solutions—these answers have been there. Martin Luther King in the 60s was talking about issues that are right here right now. We’ve had the scholars, we’ve had the solutions. What government and NGOs should do is *act* on these solutions. But it takes money, and those with the funds have to give to the right people and empower them to bring the solutions to life. It’s going to take finances, policy. It’s going to take power and the poor people don’t have it. The government is talking about ending trafficking and they should

put their money where their mouth is.

MM: There are a lot of us who are making a living from the counter-trafficking industry. Do you think we can do better to work ourselves out of a job, or is trafficking here to stay?

AK: It's not going anywhere. You got the lawyers, you got the paralegals you got the judges, you have the people in the jailhouse. This is an industry. People's livelihoods are being funded by crime. If everybody stopped committing crime today, this country would go bankrupt. We don't have another industry—we hardly produce anything. Everything in America is made in China. What is our industry? We have more prisons than anywhere on this earth combined. We have more inmates in this 'free country' than the entire world's prisons combined. If crime was to stop today there'd be so many people unemployed, it'd be ridiculous. So who is benefiting off of poor people placed in a position where of course they're going to commit crime?

The solutions have been there. Why aren't they implemented? They don't want them to be implemented. Keep locking up Black and brown people, and poor whites. Keep locking them up, keep this system going. That's why there's privatised prisons and investment banks have stock in prisons. These big corporate businesses would not invest if they didn't think they were going to get a return on their investment. Otherwise, the system continues. These conferences make thousands of dollars to go around and talk about trafficking and they pick the most outrageous stories of this one individual who went through the worst. That's not everybody, but people are donating, things are happening, but there's been no solutions implemented. They're playing with lives. Systems are playing with lives.

Meanwhile, my team, we have work to do because we have lives to save, and we have solutions and we're going to implement them at the level we can and with the funding we have.

Fuelled by his experiences in the streets, **Armand King** co-founded the non-profit Paving Great Futures and now works to guide others out of the systemic prison pipeline. His life mission now is detouring individuals from the many socio-economic pitfalls faced by the underserved communities in San Diego. He is the author of *Raised in Pimp City: The uncut truth about domestic human sex trafficking* (Bowker, 2019). Email: mr.armandking@gmail.com

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