

Human Trafficking and Sex Exploitation

Context and Global Approach

Over the last two decades human trafficking has become increasingly a matter of major concern as it has assumed massive proportions worldwide. However, the existence of trafficked and enslaved individuals was considerably present in ancient civilizations (for instance, Egypt) and it has occurred across the globe for thousands of years. From the ancient Greek and Romans to the medieval times, and up until nowadays, individuals have been subject to numerous forms of physical and sexual slavery.

Trafficking is a multifaceted and thereby complex concept often confused with its various forms or related concepts, such as prostitution or illegal immigration. Illegal movement of individuals may include migrant smuggling with the intention of exploitation. The United Nations defines trafficking and smuggling as follows:

“Trafficking in persons shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services.

“Smuggling of migrants” shall mean the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident.”¹

The definition above clarifies the key stages of trafficking: recruitment; transition from the country of origin to the country of destination; and exploitation. Sex exploitation may be the most alarming and hideous form of trafficking present in every continent of the world. Nevertheless, it is the tip of the iceberg of a massive global problem which includes numerous forms of exploitations. It comprises child trafficking as well as trafficking into exploitative

¹ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000).

work situations, that is, forced labour (Shelley, 2010). Although there are many forms of human trafficking, we can identify a transversal element: the **abuse of the immanent vulnerability of the victims**. For this matter, we will focus on a gender perspective of sex trafficking and exploitation due to its extremely traumatic outcome. At the global level, the estimated figures reveals the shocking number of women trafficked and exploited world-wide. Of the 21 million victims of human trafficking, 11.4 million are women and 53% are exposed to sex exploitation. It means 4.1 million are females composing an overwhelming majority of 97% ². This includes movement across borders and within the victim's own country, for example from rural to urban areas (Burke, 2013).

There is a mutuality between the terms human trafficking and slavery as individuals go through a "slavery-like" circumstance. Victims end up in destinations where the demand for sexual service and cheap labour is intensified, which resembles slave trade situations. However, unlike slavery, trafficking may be limited within countries and continents which is the case of Asia and Africa.

The larger part of trafficked victims, particularly women, live or originate in Asia and are trade from others areas to work in the Asian sex industry. Russia is a major source of sending and hosting victims of sex trade as well as a channel for Asian victims, whose purpose is to reach Western Europe. Nonetheless, many countries from other continents "source, host, and transit" individuals (Shelley, 2010).

In relation to Europe, the majority of exploited women are from other countries. Europe enables this demand as a result of its past, economy, policies, social welfare system, and among others. Since this complexity presents a large-scale trafficking movement, there are countless risks of abuse.

Sex Exploitation in Greece

Greece is sought after destination and transit country for human trafficking and, therefore, thousands of people are trafficked yearly across Greek borders. The dominant form of trafficking in Greece comprises the recruitment of the person into prostitution, especially with women. The sex trafficking and the exploitation of women for forced prostitution into Greece is a severe issue and a human rights violation.

² European Union. (2015). *Trafficking in Human Beings* (Eurostat Statistical Working paper). Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/eurostat_report_on_trafficking_in_human_beings_-_2015_edition.pdf. DOI: 10.2785/512112

As a result of the lack of employment opportunities and the expansion of the borders, an increase of migration has significantly affected Greece. Its geographical location positioned as an entryway country into the EU has attracted many criminal networks engaged in trafficking. Greece, thus, is a key hub for traffickers and a destination for transnational smuggling organizations (Zervos, 2015).

In 2004, the Greek government created a plan to suppress trafficking. Some of the actions included **prevention, prosecution and protection**. In regards to prevention, the plan includes educating law enforcement officials; addressing root causes in source countries; regional and international cooperation with organizations. Concerning prosecution, the Ministry of Public Order (Hellenic Police) operates 15 counter-trafficking in persons task forces throughout Greece. Finally, in relation to protection, the Greek government established a national referral mechanism focusing on victim's identification, victim hot-lines, state shelters and humanitarian repatriation.

Regardless of the development of anti-trafficking initiatives and laws Greece has unsuccessfully failed in providing solutions to address the trafficking problems. There is still a visible lack of awareness of the exploitation issue as well as a lack of laws and programs that combat trafficking, penalise traffickers and protect the victims.³

Factors

A significant number of causes enabled the increase of human trafficking, including social, political and demographic factors:

- Lack of employment opportunities
- Gender and ethnic discrimination
- Post-Cold War, decline of border controls and globalization

- Political conflicts and corruption
- Economic disparities and poverty

³ Human Rights Watch July 2001. Memorandum of Concern: *Trafficking of Migrant Women for Forced Prostitution into Greece*. Retrieved from: https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/eca/greece/greece_memo_noappendix.pdf

Traffickers, human smugglers and other organized crime groups have enlarged their activities across borders and to new regions of the world as a consequence of the instability generated by the global economy and the expansion of frontiers. This contributed to the lack of regulation and control of their illicit activities (Shelley, 2010). The accelerating use of rapid communications, such as the internet, social media and other networking technologies, provide traffickers the means of connecting with potential victims and recruit them.

Consequences

The consequences of human trafficking and sex exploitation can be multiple and severe, involving not only the victims but also their families. The family members may be threatened, tortured, or even killed if the victims refuse to collaborate with the traffickers. Once recruited, and thus exploited, the individual's future prospects is often characterised by fewer opportunities. For instances, the opportunity of obtaining education and the opportunity of being part of a collective as there is a societal breakdown due to the removal of the individuals from their families and communities.

Trafficking and sex exploitation have a direct and traumatic effect on the physical, mental and emotional well-being of victims. Beyond the sexual coercion, the victims suffer emotional abuse by their traffickers as well as by their clients. There are many negative effects in the victim's health. Mental health concerns related to self-destructive behaviours becomes incorporated into the victim's self-esteem and self-image which can lead to suicidal thoughts. Often experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder, and with that anxiety and depression, victims may turn to drugs and alcohol to numb the pain.

The visible component in all forms of sex trafficking is the dominant position by the abuser or perpetrator. Victims are forced into stressful living conditions without access to basic services and healthcare. The isolation and the association of sexuality with the feelings of fear, shame, powerlessness and blame that often arise in sexual abuse, can contribute to the development of distorted identities and therefore make the victims susceptible to sex trade.

Reflection & Response

Human trafficking is a modern form of slavery and a global epidemic. It is an issue that has existed through centuries, however it had only become truly a subject of attention in the last part of the 20th century. The lack of satisfactory laws prohibiting this activity is one of the factors contributing to its existence as well as the negative attitudes towards women and society's tolerance and acceptance of these attitudes. Gender is one element that impacts trafficking and, in fact, it is very difficult to disconnect a trafficked person's identity as a woman from her multiple identities.⁴ A trafficked woman's gender identity and her identity as a worker, a mother, an urban or rural resident influence what opportunities are available to her and what support is accessible to her. How does the exploited woman see her identity in relation to her experience of being abused?

Recognizing women in the sex trade as victims of exploitation can be difficult because of the reluctance and fear of exploited women in showing their identity in order to avoid punishment or even death. Some women do not recognize themselves as victims. It becomes a self-knowledge and identity problem of "who am I?". The anonymity and extreme actions taken by exploiters to hide their targets and their crimes also contribute to this difficulty in identifying victims of exploitation.

The understanding of the extent, depth and scope of the problems varies from country to country as there are different laws, attitudes and perspectives depending on the context. However, there is a transversal aspect and outcome: **stigma**. Sex trafficking victims are often dehumanized, and they experience the stigma of being "disposable".

Sex trafficking victims are also assumed to be prostitutes and there are many myths around it. Some examples are that it is a choice and only disadvantage groups can fall into prostitution. We can demystify those stereotypes by saying that: the loss of self-esteem and a distorted self-image can result in the belief that sex industry is the only way out! In some situations, victims are often blamed for their exploitation, and society assumes that they "knew what they were going into". This mind-set can perpetuate to escaped victims who are to be re-victimized through discrimination.

When young girls and women enter in the world of sex trade, usually they are not aware of the dangers involved. They did not have a range of choices and, according to statistics, most

⁴ Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (2010). *Beyond Borders: Exploring Links between Trafficking and Gender*. GAATW Working Papers Series 2010. Retrieved from: http://www.gaatw.org/publications/WP_on_Gender.pdf

of them did not even choose voluntarily. Instead of agreeing with the sex industry, those women submit to the limited options available to them in order to survive. The lack of options initiates a cycle of dependency which becomes challenging to get out. Women who consider a way out fear death threats by their perpetrators and they can hardly prove the violence they suffered. They lose the sense of self and they incorporate a negative identity of themselves. Other elements such as addiction to drugs and abusive relationships contribute to the difficulty of getting out of the dependency cycle. A denial process occurs when alternatives are not provided to these women.

The question arises: How can we fight the hideous issue of sex exploitation?! Well, the demand starts with consumers. We live in a capitalist world where consumerism takes place and for this reason it is extremely hard to reduce a demand in an increasingly globalized economy. In order to tackle this, a penalization policy should be implemented instead of legalization. In some countries where prostitution is legal, studies were made and the results show that there was an increase in the number of victims of trafficking, including women from other countries. It does not protect the women involved and the major majority of the victims have suffered physical violence, even in legal establishments.

Penalizing the purchase of “sexual services” helps the victims to seek for help and assistance as they feel the law supports them. There is a sense of safety and protection that gives women caught in trafficking confidence to look for alternatives. The recognition and enforcement of the view that prostitution and trafficking are harmful practices contribute to the decrease of the demand and gives the victims awareness regarding the damaging effects of the sex industry.

Furthermore, it helps to change the views regarding sex trade. Addressing the demand can deconstruct the message that buying women for sex is acceptable. Without demand, there would be no supply. If legal barriers are put into practice to tackle the demand of sex trade, then social and ethical views would change as women would be not treated as sexual merchandise anymore. Constructive messages could be send to new generations in relation to this issue.

In addition to intervention, prevention is crucial in combating the human trafficking problem. For instances, more research studies that analyse and understand better the scope of the problem as well as more awareness raising campaigns. This last one is a very important preventive measure to help victims to be more conscious and less likely to be tricked by perpetrators.

Besides getting the society more involved and more informed and active citizens, it is also fundamental long-term programs in terms of rebuilding, healing and restoring from the damages that a life of exploitation can cause. It does take time and a long-term basis helps to maximize the capacity to exit safely and effectively from the oppressing situation. A long-term approach gives the opportunity to engage with services which can provide support to improve a person's belief that they are capable to achieve lasting changes in their lifestyles. Achievable goals at the long-term level are effective to help to move forward. Community House Damaris provides this; it provides a program, care and services for up to seven years.

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