

International Aspects of Human Trafficking

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As much as we would like to believe that slavery and human trafficking are only horrific aspects of our collective past, these tremendous abuses of human rights and human dignity have in some form continued to exist throughout the world and, in fact, are experiencing a dramatic resurgence in recent years. The details vary from country to country, but, put simply, human trafficking is the coerced use of human beings as objects of commerce. It is a reemergence of slave labor and extreme forms of sexual exploitation.

Trafficking in human beings is a multi-billion growth industry. As of 2013, it is estimated that 21-27 million people are victims of trafficking and forced labor in our world today.

More often than not, trafficking victims are recruited through promises of what they believe are offers of legitimate jobs. They may be abducted or even purchased from family members. Once they are in the hands of traffickers, victims' movements are generally restricted. They are isolated from the surrounding community, their legal documents are taken, and they are often victims of considerable physical and sexual violence.

In destination countries, trafficking victims who escape or are picked up by local authorities are frequently not recognized as victims of a crime but rather considered undocumented aliens. Often, they are detained and deported, right back to the traffickers, where they are 'recycled' or resold, and their nightmare begins again.

As a result of increasing public attention on this crisis, in 2000 the Member countries of the United Nations established a definition of human trafficking which is now generally accepted throughout the world. This definition was developed as part of the United Nations' *Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime*, and more specifically the convention's *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*.

Core elements of the definition

- Action of: Recruitment, transportation, transfer, receipt of persons
- By means of: deception, coercion, threat or use of force, abuse of power, giving of payments or benefits to a person in control of victim
- For the purpose of: exploitation, which includes at a minimum exploiting the prostitution or other sexual exploitation of others, force labor, slavery and slavery-like conditions, and the removal of organs.

It is impossible to deny the suffering of the victims of trafficking. What may be harder to understand are the forces that create and sustain this global problem. These forces and the array of initiatives necessary to combat them are far more complex.

Trafficking does not exist in isolation. It is connected to economic, political and social forces that increase the vulnerability and desperation of the poor and marginalized.

Trafficking is one of the most horrific results of the economic and social disparities that increase the vulnerability of millions of people, leaving many to be treated as little more than disposable commodities.

Understanding Root Causes:

Early on, Catholic Relief Services identified and responded to human trafficking as a profound human-rights concern that was disproportionately impacting the poor and marginalized — the people who are traditionally CRS' first priority. However, over the course of the past decade we have also increasingly recognized that human trafficking is occurring in sectors we have prioritized for many years: economic development with poor communities; emergency response, HIV and AIDS; and programs for refugees, displaced people and migrants. In the section that follows, we take a look at the factors that are increasing people's vulnerability and risk for becoming trafficking victims.

Economic: Trafficking has been described as "the dark underbelly of globalization." It is one of the end results of rapid economic, technological and social changes worldwide.

Such rapid changes have created or deepened people's vulnerability, and at the same time, expanded the opportunities for predators to exploit that vulnerability. CRS' recognized the need to reduce economic vulnerability while strengthening the ability of communities to protect people at-risk.

Economic factors driving the expansion of human trafficking include not only poverty itself but also:

- *Lack of employment options*, which may have existed in the past.
- *Rapid and severe economic decline* in some countries.
- *Elimination of social safety nets* — many countries have been mandated to restructure their economies and minimize social spending in order to qualify for multilateral loans and international economic support.
- *Fluidity of capital* — recent advances in information systems have made the profits from criminal activity such as trafficking, easier to transfer and launder rapidly across the globe.
- *Race to the bottom on labor standards/cost of production* — increased international competition to produce consumer goods at the lowest cost possible can, and has, increased abusive labor practices, forced labor and slavery-like practices the most severe outcome.
- *Corruption* — state corruption is a serious concern in many societies and is closely tied to the spread of trafficking. Corruption of state representatives responsible for public order and social welfare can expand as a result of economic decline.

In Eastern Europe the fall of economic and political systems in the 1980's and 1990's coincided with a sharp increase in human trafficking. The chaotic period before new systems were established included violent conflicts in the Balkans, a political vacuum filled in some cases, by organized crime, and economic decline that included the elimination of many jobs and social programs. Women and children were disproportionately impacted by these changes and quickly became the primary victims of human trafficking from this region.

Economic migration: As economies are increasingly integrated and investment and employment quickly move from one part of the globe to another, workers generally do not have the legal freedom of movement to go where employment exists.

There is also a demographic shift occurring. Many wealthier nations have aging populations and dramatically decreased birth rates, increasing their need for younger immigrant labor to fill gaps in everything from high tech, services, and manual labor. Yet in many of these same countries restrictive immigration laws are out of sync with the needs of either receiving or sending country labor and societal needs, and few avenues for safe, legal migration are in place.

In the absence of safe and legal options for migration, including opportunities for immigrant families to be reunited, large numbers of vulnerable migrants have little choice but to place themselves at the mercy of migrant smugglers and in the worst cases, unknowingly in the hands of traffickers.

Emergency and Conflict: In the wake of natural disasters media attention is increasingly raising public awareness on the link between *emergencies* (natural disasters and violent conflict) and an increased risk of human trafficking. In *conflict and post-conflict periods*, displaced and endangered people make desperate decisions, including relying upon smugglers (who may turn out to be traffickers) in an attempt to get out of harm's way.

The international response and related policies impacting refugees and asylum seekers often fall far short of both international commitments and the needs of large numbers of people. People who are compelled to seek refuge or asylum outside their home areas increasingly face few resettlement options. As mentioned earlier, desperate people faced with limited options for protection are often driven to make decisions that place them in further danger.

In conflict zones, the manner in which men and women are impacted differently needs to be taken into consideration, as a factor in preventing trafficking. In post-conflict contexts male members of a society are often disproportionately recruited by armed groups or killed, while women and children are disproportionately represented in the internally displaced and refugee populations.

Several years ago a visit to the US-Mexico border was organized for US Bishops to bring attention to the situation of unaccompanied minor migrants and child trafficking victims. During this visit the bishops met a 14 yr. old boy from Central America who had migrated to the U.S. in search of work to help provide for his family. After a perilous journey through Guatemala and Mexico, he crossed the desert on foot and was found on a ranch in Texas, barely able to walk. The ranch owner said he could stay on his land... on the condition that he work without pay, survive on no more than bread and water and be held in shackles each night so as not to escape. He started out as an unaccompanied child migrant and ended up a victim of trafficking, discovered because another child saw him, recognized something was horribly wrong and reported the situation.

As their socioeconomic conditions deteriorate and there are significant delays in their opportunity to return home, integrate into their place of refuge or resettle, women and children become even more vulnerable to criminal predators.

Other Social Factors:

Gender Discrimination: Although men and boys are also vulnerable to trafficking, a significant social factor underlying trafficking is the low status of women and girls in many parts of the world. Low status can lead to discriminatory and abusive treatment. A significant percentage of trafficking victims experienced domestic violence or incest earlier in life. Many countries have limited legal protections for women in cases of domestic and sexual violence or harassment. Even in countries with laws against various forms of violence against women, including sex trafficking, the laws are often poorly enforced, with violators receiving minimal sentencing.

The feminization of poverty is a global reality. Women are particularly hard hit when employment options and social safety nets disappear, or where they never existed in the first place. Where girls are less valued than boys, families make less investment in the girls' futures. Current limitations on girls' access to education and information also increase their vulnerability.

Access to Education: Children who are not in formal school settings are far more likely to become victims of human trafficking. Street kids easily disappear. Child laborers have few protections against the worst forms of abuse and servitude. Schools are also a key venue for teaching both the child and family about the dangers of human trafficking and for developing job skills that lead to economic options.

HIV and AIDS: CRS has worked extensively with people impacted by the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Tragically, a significant relationship exists between human trafficking and vulnerability to HIV. Sexual abuse and prostitution of trafficking victims is a core element of the trafficking-HIV and AIDS relationship, with younger and younger trafficking victims identified.

Not only is human trafficking creating greater risk of exposure to HIV, the HIV and AIDS crisis itself is driving greater victimization. Without the support of a family structure, children who have lost their parents to AIDS are particularly vulnerable to traffickers, and young children are trafficked precisely because they are less likely to be HIV-positive.

When the Tsunami hit India some years ago, many people lost their lives, children were orphaned, women widowed, communities lost their means of support in fishing villages and cities alike. A partner organization CRS works with on human trafficking immediately conducted a trafficking risk assessment along with emergency responders, where it became obvious that if communities and families were not able to quickly reconstruct and re-establish a means of income, many of the widows and orphans would be seen as economic burdens and be at much greater risk to be sold into trafficking. Reconstruction funding and protection measures needed to occur rapidly to prevent this.

Demand: In actions that combat trafficking, there is much less attention paid to consumer demand for products that are the end result of forced labor, and "services" of sex trafficking victims. As with trafficking in drugs or guns, it is essential to approach the problem in terms of supply (and the conditions creating supply), distribution by traffickers, criminal networks, corrupt authorities, and demand (clients and consumers).

CONCLUSION: As an organization that works closely with thousands of local, national, international partners throughout the world we approach the issue of human trafficking from the perspective of the very human face of poverty and marginalization; and from the constant awareness of local, national and international economic and social policies that are failing the most vulnerable in our societies; of the growing necessity for labor migration, and of migration under conditions that are increasingly life-threatening and abusive.

Trafficking is a profound and abusive violation of the human dignity and human rights of the individual directly harmed, but also stands as an offense to our shared humanity. Human trafficking is a phenomenon that can be overcome, and it must not be allowed to continue to flourish or consume the lives of the most vulnerable.

Moldova is a country in Eastern Europe with one of the highest rates of victims of sex trafficking. Young women (high school and college age) see few employment or educational opportunities, unless they migrate out of the country.

Many have experienced domestic violence in their own families and in their marriages, with few avenues of protection from such abuse. Migrating for a job somewhere else appears as their avenue of greatest hope. Yet, even employment recruiters known in their communities or by their families have frequently turned out to be the first link in the chain of violent and degrading sex trafficking across multiple countries, leaving their victims severely traumatized, if they survive at all.