

## TRAFFICKING OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN THE AMERICAS

### Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation

*The men came to their village promising jobs as housekeepers and waitresses in the USA. The Mexican women, as young as 14 and eager for the chance to help their families, agreed to go. When the women arrived in Florida, “bosses” confiscated their false travel documents and said they would be arrested as illegal immigrants if they ever ran away. They were forced to pay their \$2,000 transportation fees through prostitution, 12 hours a day, six days a week. Guards were posted at the doors. Attempted escapes were punished with severe beatings. The bosses considered rape a training method. Mexican farm workers paid \$20 for a condom and 15 minutes with a woman, though on average the women received \$3 per encounter. It became impossible for the women to pay their debts, since the bosses added charges for room, board and miscellaneous fines to the original transportation fee. Eventually two 15 year-olds successfully fled to the Mexican consulate, and the traffickers were arrested. The women face deportation to Mexico, where some of the original recruiters are still at large.<sup>1</sup>*

*“Trafficking in persons shall mean the recruitment, transportation, 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.”*

*UN Convention Against Transnational Crime (2000),  
Protocol to suppress and punish trafficking in  
persons...*

<http://www.odccp.org/palermo/convmain.html>

Though no one representative trafficking narrative exists, this true account incorporates elements common to many cases of trafficking for sexual exploitation. The victims, mostly women and children, are often deceived about the true nature of the work. They are exploited in slavery-like conditions. The traffickers grow rich, but the victims are held in debt bondage.

Throughout the world, human trafficking of this nature continues with near impunity. It is a high-profit and low-risk endeavor for the traffickers, in many cases carrying penalties far less severe than drug trafficking. However, it is not low-risk for the millions of women and children trafficked and exploited in the sex industry.

Poverty, gender-based discrimination in employment and a history of sexual and physical violence are all factors that can make women and children vulnerable to traffickers. Some are abducted and sold, some are deceived into consenting by the promise of a better life or a better job, and some feel that entrusting themselves to traffickers is the only economically viable option. Regardless of the route of entry, most women and children trafficked for sexual exploitation suffer extreme violations of their human rights, including the right to liberty, the right to dignity and security of person, the right not to be held in slavery or involuntary servitude, the right to be free from cruel and inhumane treatment, the right to be free from violence, and the right to health.

### Why can't they just leave?

Some trafficking victims are physically imprisoned by locks, bars or guards. Those with apparent freedom to leave are controlled by other means. Physical, sexual and psychological violence are employed against them effectively. Former trafficking victims report being beaten, in some cases with iron rods, for refusing clients, attempting escape, or “causing trouble.” Others have reported being drugged or forced to consume alcohol, some to the extent that they became addicted. Many women are “free to go”—as soon as they pay off a debt that grows each day. Traffickers threaten to have victims arrested, or their family members harmed, if they misbehave or tell anyone. Traffickers take care to instill an acute fear of police and immigration officials, to silence the women and smother their hope of escape. In one case, women were so terrified when police raided their brothel that they hid in the closet. The complex mixture of fear, intimidation and violence used by traffickers and brothel owners effectively immobilizes the victims.

### Trafficking and Health

The trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation is accompanied by potentially lifelong and/or life-threatening health consequences. It prevents victims from attaining the highest possible level of physical, mental and social well-being. The World Health Organization is currently drafting recommendations for action to address the health implications of trafficking.

Numerous reports of accidents and deaths have caused the International Organization for Migration to identify trafficking as the most dangerous form of migration. Clandestine transportation puts migrants at risk of drowning, freezing, or suffocating, so that the trafficking process itself becomes a health hazard. Victims' health is further endangered in situations of sexual exploitation. Available data

suggest several areas of concern:

- § **Violence:** The consequences of psychological, physical and sexual violence associated with trafficking and sexual exploitation include depression, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and physical injuries such as bruises, broken bones, head wounds, stab wounds, mouth and teeth injuries, and even death.
- § **Reproductive Health:** Involvement in the sex industry is associated with an increased risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Pregnancy and forced or unsafe abortions are primary health concerns, exacerbated by lack of access to health care.
- § **HIV/AIDS:** HIV risk is heightened in situations where victims do not have access to condoms, or where they are not in a position to negotiate condom use. The risk is further increased by cuts and tears in vaginal and anal tissue due to rough sex, rape and STI-related ulcers.
- § **Substance Abuse:** Many women and children in the sex industry use drugs and/or alcohol as a coping mechanism. Both voluntary and forced use commonly lead to addiction and its attendant health consequences.
- § **Access to Health Care:** Fear of detection and deportation can leave undocumented women reluctant to access social services. In situations of debt bondage, women may not be able to pay for care. Those forcibly kept in brothels may not be allowed to leave to seek health care. Because their access to care is so restricted, trafficking victims are at high risk of complications arising from undiagnosed and untreated infections, such as pelvic inflammatory disease, chronic pelvic pain, ectopic pregnancy, and sterility.
- § **Children:** Often lacking accurate information and the skills, power and ability to negotiate condom use, children are at greater risk of HIV infection. Due to their immature reproductive tracts, girls are especially vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections and are more likely to suffer long term damage from them. The traumatic sexualization, betrayal, powerlessness and stigmatization involved in sexual exploitation are particularly damaging to child and adolescent development, and can lead to various types of psychiatric morbidity and an impaired ability to form attachments and successful interpersonal relationships

## Trafficking in the Americas?

Lack of information on trafficking in the Americas should not be mistaken for the absence of large-scale trafficking activity. A growing number of reports from non-governmental organizations, the media, and legal cases indicate that trafficking in women and children for sexual exploitation is a significant problem in the Americas.

Available data show that women and children are trafficked to, from and within the region, with accounts reported in nearly every country. Political instability and social unrest in some areas have created environments conducive to trafficking. Victims in the Americas are sexually exploited through brothels, bars, massage parlors, street prostitution, and pornography. The popularity of Latin America as a destination for sex tourists, which has increased since Asia began measures to reduce sex tourism, is particularly alarming. Growth of the sex industry and the demand for commercial sex assure that, without action, the incidence of trafficking will only increase.

### Some estimates for the Americas:

- § 50,000 women and children trafficked to the USA annually (CIA)
- § 35,000 women trafficked out of Colombia annually (Interpol)
- § 50,000 women from the Dominican Republic working abroad in the sex industry in 1996 (IOM)
- § 2,000 children exploited in 600 brothels in Guatemala City (Guatemala City police)
- § 500,000 girls in prostitution in Brazil, many trafficked into the gold mining regions of the Amazon (CBIA).

Despite growing concern and awareness of trafficking, the victims, perpetrators, and even the issue itself remain nearly invisible. Lack of data obscures the full extent of the problem and impedes the policy process. Recognizing that research and international collaboration are essential steps in addressing the issue, the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) of the Organization of American States (OAS), working with the International Human Rights Law Institute (IHRLI) of DePaul University and the Inter-American-Children's Institute (IACI) of the OAS, has launched an intensive investigation of trafficking patterns and practices in 14 countries of the Americas region.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See D'Agostino, Joseph. "The New Illegal Immigrants: Sex Slaves." *Human Events* 7/2/99, Vol. 55, Issue 24, p. 4. See also Richard, Amy O'Neill. *International Trafficking In Women To The United States: A Contemporary Manifestation Of Slavery And Organized Crime*. 1999. <http://www.cia.gov/csi/monograph/women/trafficking.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> IHRLI <http://www.law.depaul.edu> ; CIM <http://www.oas.org>

## Other Resources:

- WOMEN, HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM (PAHO) <http://www.paho.org/genderandhealth>
- CASA ALIANZA, information on child sexual exploitation <http://www.casa-alianza.org/EN/human-rights/sexual-exploit>
- COALITION AGAINST TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN (CATW) <http://www.catwinternational.org>
- COALITION TO ABOLISH SLAVERY AND TRAFFICKING (CAST) <http://www.trafficked-women.org>
- INSTITUTO INTERAMERICANO DEL NIÑO (IACI) has published the first comprehensive analysis of child sexual exploitation in 10 Latin American Countries: *Violencia y Explotación Sexual contra Niños y Niñas en América Latina y el Caribe*. (1999).
- INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION (IOM) <http://www.iom.int>
- THE PROTECTION PROJECT <http://www.protectionproject.org>