

Trafficking in women as gender-based violence

Approximately 200,000 women and children are trafficked into the European Union every year. Worldwide, estimates range from 900,000 to an astounding 4,000,000 women and children trafficked annually. To put this number into perspective, in the last decade of what is being called 'Modern Slavery', Southeast Asia alone has produced three times as many victims of trafficking than the entire history of slavery from Africa.

Human trafficking takes on many forms, including international sexual exploitation. Trafficking, as opposed to smuggling, is most often involuntary and targets young, poor females. Although many of the women trafficked into prostitution are aware that they will be migrating, they are deceived about the nature of the work they will be forced to perform and their inability to leave at will, as well as their future working conditions.

The gendered aspect of trafficking brings about particular concerns for these migrants. A factor relevant to trafficking survivors is the need for State protection, as it is not uncommon for trafficking survivors to face violence or the threat of violence by the organized crime groups in control of human trafficking. These reprisals are more likely to occur in the country of origin upon repatriation than the host country. In cases where protection of trafficking victims is weak, traffickers have corrupted officials, and trafficking victims retain debts to their traffickers or have testified against them, their fear of physical harm or further exploitation is palpable.

The international community is striving to address the issues of trafficking through legal instruments, including most recently the commitments at the UN Millennium Summit to Fight Transnational Crime including Trafficking in Human Beings, in Palermo Italy. However, governments too often focus on strategies that target the legal and immigration-based issues of trafficking, but don't address the human rights of trafficked people.

Although some States have developed legislation specifically addressing the protection needs of trafficked persons, implementation is sporadic. Some precedent has been set, however, toward the extension of refugee protection to trafficking survivors.

In cases where a well-founded fear of persecution exists, as members of a particular social group trafficking victims should be entitled to enjoy the protection afforded to other persecuted groups through existing refugee mechanisms. Trafficked prostituted women are rarely granted refugee status, although there is growing consensus that they should be allowed access to refugee determination proceedings. If trafficking survivors are afforded the possibility of asylum in their host country, the benefits may also extend to national governments, as more survivors may be willing to testify against their traffickers.

In light of the upcoming European harmonization of migration and asylum policy in 2004, policy makers might be wise in exploring the possibility of updating the international refugee regime to protect the victims of trafficking with a well-founded fear of persecution, and therefore assume responsibility for those suffering what Kofi Annan calls 'The most egregious form of human rights violation that the United Nations now confronts'.

FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

‘While trafficking is a human rights issue, it is also a socio-political and economic issue, and cannot be separated from issues of nationality, gender and class inequalities.’

Worldwide, poverty is increasingly and disproportionately affecting women. Of the 1.3 billion absolute poor in the world today, 70% are women and their minor dependents. This poverty is due, in part, to women’s lack of access to formal education and job opportunities in their countries of origin. Further, women fail to fully benefit from market ‘reforms’ of today’s world economic regime due to the lack of economic power in their communities and families.³⁶ At the same time, women are the principal segment of the population affected by the massive cuts in social spending by governments following structural adjustment or similar reforms. Due to gender inequities and relative powerlessness, ‘people who have little to lose may be willing to take great risks’.

Women are also increasingly migrating to cities within their own countries. While this most often occurred in the past as women accompanied their partners, women are progressively migrating for economic reasons and finding that formal sector jobs are even more closed to them than to their male counterparts due to their lack of schooling or other discrimination. Therefore, patterns show that the informal sector is largely receiving female internal migrants, and women are taking jobs with a lack of job security or benefits. Female-headed households are also on the increase in the majority world of developing countries, and these households tend to be poorer and support more dependents than male-headed households. This is resulting in what is being called the ‘feminization of poverty’.

‘Because members of female-headed households are generally restricted to low-productivity informal-sector employment and experience higher dependency burdens, they are more likely to be poor and malnourished and less likely to obtain formal education, health care, or clean water and sanitation.’

The internal uprooting, lack of a support network, and increased financial responsibility adds to the vulnerability of women to be recruited by a trafficker, in the hopes of improving her family or personal economic situation.

FEMINIZATION OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

The European Commission contends that contributing factors to international female migration include female-focused unemployment, extreme poverty, and the marginalization of women in source countries. This is particularly true when analyzing countries in transition from a community-based to an individual-based economic system. Following the collapse of communism in the USSR, and in communist states supported by the USSR, economic controls were imposed that led to great unemployment, social and financial insecurity.

‘A system of free enterprise without controls was imposed on the new East European States and Russia the like of which had never been tried before, even at the heart of the capitalist world. The U.S.’s... own response to severe economic depression in the 1930s was to invest in federal programs involving strong state intervention and the introduction of a welfare safety net under Roosevelt’s new deal... Russia and its satellite states, however, were not to be allowed such supports – here the free market had to reign in all its magnificent implacability. Right-wing economists... were sent in as consultants to ensure that the rules were followed and no soft options adopted. The glorious results of this ‘peace settlement’ were manifest in 1998, following the collapse of the ruble...’

Those to be most affected by this economic transition were women. According to the U.S. Agency for International Development, between 70 and 80% of currently unemployed Russian workers are women. Similarly, in Ukraine and other Eastern European countries, women make up 70% of those involuntarily unemployed.

This is equally true for Moldova, considered by IOM to be the main source of trafficked women for Western Europe, the Balkans and the Middle East. At a time when 25% of the workforce has immigrated internationally, news reports contend that the poorest Moldovans are selling their own organs, and 80% of households live below the poverty line.

'In Albania, Moldova, southern Bulgaria and Romania, entire towns have been robbed of their young female populations, sociologists say. While some victims are kidnapped at gunpoint, others are lured by promises of marriage, jobs and better living conditions.'

Not surprisingly, patterns have also emerged that as women are struggling with poverty and are internally displaced for economic reasons, international migration of women is also on the rise. Not only is there a feminization of poverty, but a feminization of migration, as well. Female patterns of migration contribute to the overall patterns outlined previously; women, too are affected by unemployment and poverty, and depend on migrant networks for information regarding how best to migrate to the global north. When one adds into the equation the disproportionately higher levels of poverty among women worldwide, the family responsibility for both their children and elderly relatives, the lack of formal job opportunities in countries of origin and the lower levels of education available to women, it is not surprising that migrant streams which have typically been male are gradually becoming filled by women. In fact, according to IOM, over half of the world's migrants are women, and the numbers of unaccompanied women who migrate are on the increase.

The majority of women who migrate internationally do not succumb to traffickers. Discrimination against women continues to affect these migrants during their time outside their country; female migrants generally work in less favorable conditions for less pay than their male counterparts. However, they are able to aid their families financially, and their standings within their own communities tend to increase upon return to their countries of origin.⁴⁸ Due to the relative success of female migrants, who depend upon migrant networks for contacts in their countries of destination, as well as housing, transportation and occasionally financial assistance, it is not surprising that other women would put themselves at risk for trafficking by attempting to follow a similar path. Further, due to the stigma attached to prostitution in most countries of origin, repatriated trafficked women discuss the exact nature of their experiences abroad with difficulty, so the risks are not fully understood by other women considering a similar relocation.

A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON TRAFFICKING

A gender perspective on **trafficking**:

- ❖ acknowledges that women and men, girls and boys are trafficked;
- ❖ Recognizes the similarities and differences in the **trafficking** experience of women, men and children in relation to vulnerabilities to **trafficking**, violations, consequences, and differential policy and programme impacts;
- ❖ Holds that these differences, that disadvantage women and children the most, are grounded in their more marginalized social locations – gender, age, class, ethnicity;
- ❖ Empowers potential victims, and those trafficked, especially women and children to access remedies and claim rights;
- ❖ Gives practical effect to this through enabling policy, legislative, institutional and programmatic initiatives appropriate to their specific concerns.

Saniella is an Albanian survivor of trafficking who was transferred numerous times within Europe before working in a brothel in Belgium. Although she and her family have received threats, Saniella is returning home. A Belgian NGO has documented her story.

‘Trafficked to Western Europe

My name is Saniella. I was born in Korçë in Albania in 1984. I live with my family in the outskirts of Korçë. Last summer when I was walking to a friend’s house a car drew by and two men offered me to drive to my friend’s house. One of the men was a cousin of my brother’s friend. Instead of driving me to my friend’s place they took me to a house in Vlorë, where a few other girls were staying. They told me that my brother wanted me to go to Italy, where I could work for an Albanian family and earn money to support my family. They also threatened me that bad things could happen to my family if I would resist them or try to run away.

...One evening we were taken from the house and brought to the sea shore. There we waited for two hours before embarking on a boat... There were about 40 people on this small boat. We were not allowed to speak to the other passengers but I heard that we were heading for Italy... We arrived the same night in Italy and had to jump off in the water at about 30 metres from the coastline. There were cars waiting to pick up some of the passengers... The next day two other men took us to the train station and we left for Milan. There a car was waiting for us and we were taken to a house where we stayed for two days.

We then took the train to Paris. The men who had transferred us to Italy didn't go with us. Only me and the girl from Moldova took off to Paris. The other girl from Albania remained in Milan... In Paris we took a train to Brussels where we were picked up by another man... They drove us to a house in Antwerp.

The same night one of the men told us that we had to work in prostitution. I told him that I didn't want to work in prostitution but he threatened me. The very night I was forced by another man to have sexual intercourse. He told me that this would be a preparation for my new job. I cried and said that my brother would never agree upon this. They told me that my brother was in Albania and wouldn't be much of a help.

I worked for one month in a window. I had several clients a day and to hand over all the money they paid me. I was heavily guarded by those people and beaten up on several occasions. They often threatened to kill me or harm my family if I wouldn't comply. I was afraid of them as I knew they carried guns and were on drugs.

One night police came in the window and took me to the police station... They referred me to the Payoke shelter where I have been staying for three weeks now. They helped me to contact my family. My father told me that my brother had been receiving threats by this gang in Korçë... My father is planning to move to another place as it might be dangerous for us in Korçë. The social workers from Payoke are assisting me and are currently arranging my return to Albania.’