

Breaking the Silence: Addressing the Global Human Trafficking Epidemic

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Nothing propels passion or stirs emotions more than the hideous stories of human trafficking. Whether it includes sexual exploitation, child labor, or even organ harvesting, countless stories of the fear and distress that these victims have endured challenge the capacity of our understanding. No country is immune to human trafficking; from the world's most powerful countries to developing ones—none are impervious.

How can this be considered a significant problem of the current century? It is a low-risk crime that can yield high rewards; moreover, the profits are so insurmountable that the risk of being caught is negligible (Masci, 2004; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012). Because of the subversive nature of human trafficking, it has been difficult to acquire official data; therefore, the number of people trafficked fluctuates widely across the world in published reports.

Recently, human trafficking has received an increasing amount of international awareness. Every year, thousands of men, women, and children are captured or misled by traffickers in their own countries. It is one of the most intractable problems worldwide (Polaris Project, 2009). To realize that this may happen unnoticed in our own neighborhoods as we go about our daily lives is unthinkable. Often deemed a hidden crime, human trafficking is shrouded in secrecy and silence. Victims are frequently lured with false promises of well-paying jobs or manipulated through romantic relationships, only to find themselves trapped in nightmares of exploitation and abuse. Tactics used by traffickers are cunning and coercive, making it difficult for victims to escape or seek help. They are often moved frequently to avoid detection, isolated from their families and communities, and stripped of their identification documents, exacerbating their vulnerability and dependency on their captors (O'Brien & Wen Li, 2020). Human trafficking is a major global epidemic that needs to be addressed as a significant global priority.

The United Nations' Trafficking Victim Protection Act (TVPA) has defined the forms of trafficking as follows:

(a) Sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age; or
(b) the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery (2000).

At the center of human trafficking lies the truth that people can end up suffering regardless of their consent, forcibly moved into conditions of exploitation, or occasionally, tragically born into such conditions. Traffickers regularly exploit common vulnerabilities, including poverty, loss of education, or political instability, and prey on people who are principally defenseless. This crime not only removes people's freedom and dignity but also continues a cycle of abuse and exploitation that can last for many generations. Therefore, the reaction to human trafficking must be addressed by incorporating preventive measures, stringent enforcement of regulations, and complete victim support services (Duncan & Dehart, 2019). By understanding the full extent and complexity of this issue, we can be better prepared to break down these exploitation networks and offer hope and support to those affected.

According to research by the U.S. State Department, an estimated 13 million people are being exploited through global trafficking at any given time (U.S. State Department Report, 2010). They estimated annual profits more than USD 31 billion. In addition, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's Global Report on Trafficking in Persons (2009) stated that most trafficking victims are women and children (approximately 88%). Furthermore, the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) estimates that over seven million children are trapped and forced into labor or sexual exploitation (2002). However, it is important to note that the data on human trafficking are grossly underreported; actual numbers may be higher as trafficking victims are reluctant to report their crimes to the appropriate authorities because of fear or retaliation. The intention is not to misrepresent the data from human trafficking but to show that this type of business is a significant underground industry that has become a growing global concern; the utmost priority should be given to battle this. This study focuses on some of the root causes of human trafficking, including economic sources and the supply and demand for sex labor, one of the leading causes of human trafficking.

1. Economics

Regarding our global economy, most of us will readily agree that the situation is in a state of influx: an increasing number of people are facing financial hardships or even poverty. Consequently, human trafficking has increased (Aronowitz, 2009; Truong, 2005); however, where this agreement usually ends is on the question of whether many of these trafficking victims were forced into these situations. While some are convinced, others maintain that many were misled into believing in good fortune and better living. In other words, poverty is one of the main factors that lead people to fall prey to traffickers. Human trafficking traps victims of poverty through exploitation. It is a high-profit and relatively low-risk business with sufficient supply and growing demand, which will be discussed later (UNODC, 2012). A dollar figure commonly cited in the UNODC's report is 7 billion, although what this represents and how it was concluded is not clear. This figure may represent the amount of money made by selling trafficked victims, but this is almost impossible to clarify (Hughes, 2005). Combating this system requires a considerable amount of time and resources; however, swift action to eliminate it should be prioritized.

Reports have suggested that the most common form of exploitation is “debt bondage” (Miller, 2002). In an article written by the United Nations Supplementary Convention (1957), debt bondage was defined as follows:

“The status or condition arising from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services or of those of a person under his control as security for a debt, if the value of those services as reasonably assessed is not applied towards the liquidation of the debt, or the length and nature of those services are not, respectively, limited and defined.”

A person pledges to a guarantor, usually in the form of a monetary loan. However, virtually none have been released from debt. Consequently, many of them incur additional debt, and the nature of their service becomes irrelevant; there is complete physical and mental control of the victim. This is closely related to modern-day slavery; it is defined by the United Nations (UN Slavery Convention, 2008) as “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.” The notions of debt bondage and modern-day slavery are closely tied; both render victims helpless and at the complete mercy of their owners. One of the solutions proposed is to rework immigration laws in each country to allow

more people the opportunity to enter without going through extensive procedures; the current method tends to be cumbersome and lengthy for immigrants (ibid.). This has also led to one of the leading problems in human trafficking: the demand for sex labor.

2. The supply and demand of sex labor

Sex labor works much like the demand and supply theory in economics: there is a fueling demand for this service, and there will always be supplies readily available to meet it. Hundreds of thousands of people are forced into sex trafficking daily, most of whom are women and children. In the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000), sex trafficking refers to “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act.” A commercial sex act is any sexual act in which anything of value is given or received by a person. There is a thriving business for sex trafficking, and its demand is astonishingly high. The demand for victims of commercial sex acts can be divided into three categories.

The first are potential buyers who seek out women, children, and sometimes men to purchase sex acts. Commonly referred to as “johns,” they fuel the business with their money and their desires. The second factor is the people who profit in this industry; they include “pimps,” brothel owners, and even corrupt officials who support the system for economic gains. The third factor is culture, which indirectly creates demands for victims through prostitution. One can find endless amounts of endorsement through music (song titles such as “Pimping all over the World” and “P.I.M.P”). In addition, video games have an incredible amount of prostitution satire in gaming series such as “Grand Theft Auto” and “Leisure Suit Larry.” Images of this and other commercial sex acts, such as stripping and lap dancing, are sadly encouraged and influenced by public opinion; most believe that this is a victimless crime (Hughes, 2005). However, this model exists only through the cooperation of all three factors; if one element is eliminated, the business will gradually erode. One way to achieve this is through an extensive awareness program that allows people to be armed with resources and information to combat trafficking.

Proposed Solutions for Combatting Human Trafficking

1. Increased Awareness

One of the best ways to combat human trafficking is learning when a victim is subject

to harm and raising awareness through the media. Efforts should be made to raise awareness of this problem through public information, campaigns, and demonstrations. These should address basic human rights standards and make victims aware that trafficking is a crime. For example, the UNODC has designed a campaign to build understanding and convey information about the issue of trafficking through illustrative videos. One of the videos focused on the trafficking of women for both labor and sexual exploitation through powerful messages and unsettling images (UNODC, 2012). In another video, victims of forced labor were introduced; many of these victims were men and children (ibid.). Although the United Nations is a key partner in battling this issue, the public also plays a significant role in fighting human trafficking.

There are many different forms of public awareness regarding human trafficking, including fundraisers, lectures, celebrity endorsements, and advertisements. However, perhaps the major source of widespread awareness is the Internet; there are many websites that promote a wide variety of methods to promote understanding of this growing epidemic. The largest website to which many people refer is HumanTrafficking.org. A wealth of resources, publications, and international initiatives encourage communities to prevent human exploitation. Supported by CNN.com (Kloer, 2011), this is an excellent starting point for providing additional information. Public awareness can come in all forms and initiatives, and it is important for the population to understand the problems with and solutions to human trafficking.

2. Amending Immigration Laws

Forced labor is a growing problem worldwide. While each country has its own laws regarding immigration, a survey showed that over 150 million adults worldwide prefer to migrate to the United States (Clifton, 2021). Therefore, this study focused on their immigration laws.

Forced labor and trafficking in the U.S. are commonly found in agriculture, restaurants, hotel work, and even in the sex industry (American Civil Liberties Union, 2021). It is now the second-largest criminal commerce worldwide after drug trafficking (ibid.). As stated above, there are several reasons for this growth in trafficking. Under the TVPA, victims of trafficking are eligible for services and benefits, such as financial assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid. Additionally, there are several resources for immigration relief. For instance, the U.S. issues T-Visas (immigration protection to victims of a severe form of human

trafficking) and U-Visas (victims of certain crimes who have suffered mental or physical abuse because of the crime and are willing to assist law enforcement and government officials in the investigation of criminal activity) (TVPA, 2000). Finally, immigrants can file for asylum if they fear they may be persecuted if they return to their home country (ibid.). There are several ways immigrants can avoid being trafficked and benefit from the same equality and opportunities that many American citizens enjoy.

However, many advocates disagree regarding the regulation of trafficking. Currently, there are more than 12 million immigrants without legal documents in the U.S. (National Immigration Forum, 2008); about 6 million of them are employed, representing about 5 percent of the U.S. workforce (Chaudry et al., 2010). Simply deporting them would be a daunting task; they comprise a significant portion of the workforce (ibid.). Many immigrants are choosing to risk being in the U.S. illegally to work and earn money at the many available jobs. They are not bad people who violate good laws; they are optimistic people who make difficult choices to assist their families and improve their lives.

However, if the U.S. started issuing more visas, newly admitted citizens would be a part of the U.S. workforce and claim benefits, which would bring more financial burden to an already constrained economy. There are a few such initiatives in place, including one by the Obama Administration. Recently, the committee stopped deporting illegal immigrants who entered the U.S. as children (under the age of 18 years) if they met certain requirements deemed valid by the administration. This allowed those born in the U.S. to illegal families the opportunity to stay. However, this fuels opposition; they state that it is only hurting the immigration laws set in place by allowing exemptions for certain categories of immigrants (ibid.). Many questions surround this issue; this has been a contested debate for several years and continues to attract national and international attention among the population.

3. Technology and confronting traffickers

Technology and the Internet have become important tools in the fight against human trafficking. Traffickers often use the Internet, including websites, ads, and social media, to find and sell victims (Kjellgren, 2022). This creates complex problems because it is difficult to track these online activities. However, it also gives police and anti-trafficking groups a chance to use technology to their advantage. They can monitor online spaces, use digital methods to find and save victims and capture traffickers.

Nevertheless, the fight against trafficking is not only about monitoring, but also about

raising awareness and educating people online. Social media campaigns, webinars, and digital tools can teach the public about trafficking signs and how to report them (Milivojevic, Moore, & Segrave, 2020). These actions help build a community that is alert and ready to help end trafficking.

Furthermore, technology helps countries to work together in this battle. Human trafficking is a global problem. Therefore, sharing information and resources among nations is important. Digital platforms allow fast and effective communication and data exchange among international organizations. Teamwork is key to finding and stopping trafficking networks that operate across borders.

Outlook

This paper attempts to show that human trafficking is a global issue today and needs the consideration of everyone to eliminate it. Trafficking businesses are of economic interest. The relative ease of operation and financial rewards of this industry are advantageous and appealing. Additionally, there is a rising demand and supply that exploits the sex trade. One way to combat human trafficking is to increase awareness through media. The U.S. is enacting immigration laws to provide immigrants and victims of human trafficking with the protection and assistance needed.

People are bought, sold, and transported globally. Although important steps and actions have been taken, there remains much more to do. It is important to break the ongoing cycle of human trafficking and address the reasons for it. This requires a varied approach that includes tougher law enforcement, wide-ranging policy changes, collaborations with other countries, and ongoing education efforts. By combining these efforts, we hope to make a significant difference in the fight against this terrible crime and protect people's rights and dignity worldwide.

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