The 21st Century Slave Trade: A Cacophony of Lies, Abuse, and Incompetence

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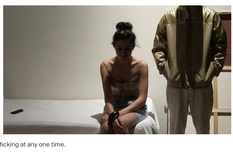

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Human trafficking is a global industry worth $32 billion and places millions of vulnerable people from poor countries in servitude, but the number of successful prosecutions is still pitifully small.

Were he alive today, the great British anti-slavery campaigner William Wilberforce would undoubtedly feel the need to begin his life's work all over again. Wilberforce may have been credited with helping to abolish slavery; yet according to the United Nations, there are still more than 2.3 million people in forced labour worldwide as a result of human trafficking at any one time.

Similarly, Wilberforce might also be compelled to voice his frustrations at the ineptitude and impotence of global law enforcement agencies in the face of mass trafficking. Despite major international efforts to combat trafficking, the fight is being lost. According to the 2011 US Trafficking in Persons Report, there were only 6,017 prosecutions and 3,619 convictions for human trafficking in 2010 – a figure that fails to commensurate with the millions of victims.

The nature of the exploitation has, of course, changed since the late 18th century when Wilberforce began his campaigns. But trafficking is still slavery because it involves forcing vulnerable people to do something against their will. Exploitation can include enforced prostitution, sexual exploitation, forced labour and the removal of organs.

According to Maria Grazia Giammarinaro, the Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings for the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), "trafficking in human beings must be acknowledged for what it is:

"Massive-scale modern-day slavery, a gross violation of human rights and freedoms, mostly a business of organized crime (which proves highly lucrative), and a serious transnational threat for individual and State security. Trafficking should not be treated as a marginal phenomenon, involving the profiles of certain victims only, or limited to sexual exploitation."

The sheer scale of the global $32 billion trafficking market is exceptionally startling considering how few prosecutions have happened. According to the UN, only one individual is convicted for every 800 trafficking victims in 2006.

The reasons for the low rate of prosecutions are many and complex, says Dr. Tomoya Obokata, from the law faculty of Queen's University, Belfast. Dr. Obokata, who has advised both the UK parliament and the European Union on trafficking policy, feels that the biggest factor is that few victims are willing, or able, to contact the police.

"Assuming they could escape, which is very difficult, they are afraid they will be arrested and deported if they go to the police. **They are also terrified of the traffickers who often subject them to rape, or drug and beat them to keep them weak and helpless.** Their guardians also play on their fear of being ostracised if it is discovered back home they are working as a prostitute."

A further problem in Western countries is that very few legal practitioners have been trained to identify traffickers, let alone provide appropriate prosecutions.

"Sentences are not severe enough in the UK and many other European nations. They vary from a few months to 10 years, which suggests that many judges don't see it as a major crime, and need to be educated," said Dr. Obokata.

Furthermore, European police forces simply do not devote enough resources to the fundamental intelligence work required.

"They want to say it's a high priority, but if you look at the allocation of resources in most European countries, a lot more police time goes into fighting terrorism, or drug crime, because they are both national security issues," Dr Obokata lamented. "Trafficking is a massive violation of human rights, but it doesn't hurt citizens."

Cuts to police funding in Europe – especially in the UK where the national budget is being cut by 20 percent over the next four years – will also impact negatively on the fight against the traffickers.

"In such circumstances, the only way to continue the fight is make better use of the proceeds of crime," said Dr Obokata. "Millions of pounds recovered from the traffickers could be used to protect victims and provide training. The legislation for this practice exists in many countries, including the UK, but is rarely used."

Dr Obakata also believes there is a strong argument for offering the victims more protection, even residency.

"The argument against this is that it will encourage trafficking but this makes no sense. Most people who are trafficked have no idea it is happening. And who would go through rape, or violence, in order to win residency?

"In Italy, there are more generous social services for victims of trafficking than in the UK and a report suggested there was no evidence that it has increased trafficking."

The lack of support for victims is partly a consequence of widespread lack of sympathy, according to the OSCE's Maria Grazia Giammarinaro.

"There is a culture of disbelief surrounding trafficked victims which has to be challenged," said Giammarinaro. "So often we see authorities challenging their victimhood, or treating them as suspects, detaining them and deporting them even in situations potentially deserving international protection. And we need to work towards building viable options for the long-term social inclusion of trafficked persons. Otherwise, many victims will continue losing hope and believing that they have no viable option but to continue to submit to their exploiters."

In addition, victims who are afraid to testify will mostly likely be deported, with potentially disastrous consequences. There is a real danger of violent reprisals, and also re-trafficking.

"We must consider whether local authorities can protect the person from intimidation and violence, whether the person may be prosecuted for acts stemming directly from the trafficking process, and whether local services can support their social inclusion, given the frequent stigmatization," said Giammarinaro. "Several national reports indicate that the risk of re-trafficking may be as high as 30 per cent."

Giammarinaro added that while great strides have been made at an international level in providing policies to tackle trafficking, especially the Palermo Protocol of 2003, **there was still a gulf between governmental policy and effective action on the ground.** As a result of state impotence, or apathy, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) had a vital role to play in supporting victims.

Unfortunately, government funding for the NGOs is limited as its priorities tend to lie elsewhere. London's Poppy Project for example, which has offered emotional and psychological support for victims since 2003, recently had its state funding withdrawn. This makes it more likely that victims will not testify against the traffickers and be deported.

Already, public testimonies of trafficking victims are even rarer than prosecutions; Yet the Poppy Project has managed to elicit testimonies from some of the woman it has helped. Here are brief extracts from two of them, which give some idea of the traumatic experiences of thousands of women.

Olena, from the Ukraine, was sold by her family to Albanian traffickers. She was taken to work as a prostitute, first in Moldova, then in Sheffield, England.

"When I was in Sheffield I was forced to see as many as 15 clients per day. I worked every day, even during my periods. They made me put a sponge inside me to stop the blood. I got a very bad infection doing this and was very ill. I was expected to make up to £400 per day for the men. I was not allowed to keep any of it. They did not let me contact my family, but they had connections in Ukraine and they visited my mother and threatened her. They told her that if I returned home they would kill me. Since I escaped I have had to have a big operation inside, as a result of my infection while working during my periods."

And Lien, from China, was trafficked into prostitution by an aunt after being orphaned at the age of 13. She lived for six years as a prostitute in her aunt's house, before one of her clients helped her to escape. The client arranged immigration papers and took her to England.

"He was nice to me but that changed when we arrived in the UK. He left me at a brothel while he went for a drink with a friend. He did not come back. He had sold me and gone back to China. I was made to work as a prostitute again, with at least five other women. Only one other woman was Chinese. The rest were all white. They threatened me and kept me locked up. I was kept there for several months and then I managed to escape in the middle of the night. I walked for three days before anybody helped me, and then a stranger called the police."

The Shocking Reality of Human Trafficking

These women figure among the 84 percent of victims in Europe who were trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation, according to the 2010 report on Trafficking of Persons to Europe for Sexual Exploitation from the UNODC (United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime).

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that the minimum number of victims trafficked for all purposes in Europe and North America was 270,000 in 2005. Based on data gathered by the UNODC, the number of victims detected in West and Central Europe was 7,300 in 2006. If about one victim in 20 were detected, the number of trafficking victims in Europe would be around 140,000.

This means about one sex worker in seven would be a trafficking victim in Europe and that 70,000 women are trafficked annually to replace those leaving the market. If there were 140,000 trafficking victims in Europe, they could roughly provide about 50 million sexual services annually, which equates to £2.5 billion (US$3 billion) annually.

The UNODC report also found a greater variety of nationalities among human trafficking victims in West and Central Europe than in any other part of the world. About 60 percent of the victims detected originate from the Balkans, Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. Another 13 percent come from Latin America, with 5 percent arriving from Africa while 3 percent come from East Asia. A large proportion of the victims (about 20 percent) are either of unspecified origins, or are local victims.

New nationalities have also appeared on the European scene in the last few years. While generally small, the share of Chinese, Paraguayan, Sierra Leonean, Uzbek and Turkmen victims has been increasing over time. In 2006, Chinese were the largest foreign group involved in sexual exploitation in Italy.

However despite their diverse nationalities, trafficked victims share common backgrounds. Most of them come from impoverished parts of the world, and are desperate to improve their lives.

Trafficking groups tend to exploit this. Balkan-based groups for example, offer promises of employment. In the Ukraine, traffickers entice 70 percent of their victims through promises of work, participation in beauty contests, modelling opportunities, affordable vacations, study abroad programmes, or marriage services.

Once the victims are ensnared, violence is then frequently used to control them. Trafficking by Balkan-based groups is described as "very violent" in the UNODC report. Similarly, Russian organized criminal gangs engaged in human trafficking are reported to adopt particularly harsh methods of control.

The report states: "Often, before being presented to clients, women are raped by the traffickers themselves, in order to initiate the cycle of abuse and degradation. Some women are drugged to prevent them from escaping."

However, large criminal gangs are not the only guilty parties. Trafficking in the Balkans, the former Soviet Union and Central Europe for instance, is usually conducted by someone known to the victim.

According to studies in the Czech Republic, Poland and Romania, a large majority of victims are recruited through acquaintances, friends or relatives. Studies from Ukraine also indicate that 11 percent of victims were trafficked with the active cooperation of their husbands.

Another misconception about trafficking is that the traffickers are men. In fact, female offending rates are higher for human trafficking than for other crimes, albeit just barely lower when compared to men.

According to a UN report (2009) into women traffickers, women made up the largest proportion of traffickers in 30 percent of countries worldwide. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, females accounted for more than 60 percent of convictions for trafficking in persons.

One of the primary reasons cited for the high percentage of women traffickers is the importance of trust between the victim and the perpetrator. Additionally in some markets, victims may become exploiters over time in order to escape further exploitation. The trend is most evident in former Soviet countries where the majority of recruiters are women who have little choice but to continue the cycle of exploitation due to the lack of available employment options to previously trafficked women.

"It is shocking that former victims become traffickers. We need to understand the psychological, financial and coercive reasons why women recruit other women into slavery," said UNODC chief Antonio Maria Costa.

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