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# Globalization and Human Trafficking

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*Globalization demands that social workers embrace more than just local and national perspectives; they must adopt an international viewpoint as well. A negative aspect of globalization that deserves more attention is the international movement of labor. This paper presents a description and analysis of trafficking, the more deleterious part of this movement of people, in a global context. Decision makers seeking to make global migration more humane need to know about the dynamics and process of trafficking, as well as ways to combat it. Definitional controversies, contextual issues (including the dynamics and processes of trafficking), and consequences of this movement for individuals and societies are discussed. Implications for social work are also presented.*

**Keywords:** *human trafficking, global migration, labor exploitation, international labor movement*

## Introduction

Globalization has resulted in an unprecedented flow of capital, goods and services, and labor into every continent and

nearly every country in the world. Although much has been written on capital flows and emerging markets (Friedman, 2000), not as much attention has been given to the tremendous flow of people seeking work outside of their home countries. Indeed, in 2006 the International Organization for Migration estimated that there were more than 191 million immigrants worldwide (IOM, 2006). Immigrants are frequently treated as outsiders in their host countries and not afforded the same protection and rights as citizens (Engstrom, 2006; Aleinikoff & Klusmeyer, 2002). In part because of their outsider status, immigrants are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and other harms, and nowhere is this more apparent than in human trafficking, a violation of basic human rights that is aptly viewed as a modern form of slavery. Human trafficking represents perhaps the worst form of labor exploitation and can be regarded as one of the dark sides of globalization.

Trafficking supplies human beings for prostitution, sweatshop labor, street begging, domestic work, marriage, adoption, agricultural work, construction, armed conflicts (child soldiers), and other forms of exploitative labor or services. Estimating with any accuracy the number of victims of human trafficking is a daunting task, so much so that the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime stated that such a "statistical goal may prove to be unachievable" (UNODC, 2006, p. 45). Methodological problems have not, however, prevented organizations and scholars from offering widely ranging estimates. For example, a 2005 report by the International Labor Organization said that there were approximately 12,300,000 victims in forced labor in the world (ILO, 2005), while Bales (2005) offered an estimate of 27 million. There is general agreement that the majority of persons trafficked are female, perhaps nearly 80 percent (UNODC, 2006).

Labor exploitation of trafficked persons is hugely profitable. One estimate places the global profits at approximately \$32 billion annually (Feingold, 2005). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (US DHHS) described trafficking as the fastest growing criminal industry in the world (2004). Among illegal enterprises, trafficking is second only to drug dealing, and tied with the illegal arms industry, in its ability to generate dollars.

Human trafficking is both a global problem and a

domestic problem. The United States is a major receiver of trafficked persons: It is estimated that 15,000 to 50,000 of internationally trafficked victims arrive in the United States each year (United States Department of State [US DOS], 2005; US DHHS, 2004; UNODC, 2006). Trafficked victims can be found in various sectors of the U.S. economy, including prostitution, sweatshops, factories, and service industry work (US DHHS, 2004). These data demonstrate the scope of the problem. Human trafficking is a highly underreported crime and victims can be extremely difficult to identify (Hopper, 2004). Due to the criminal, secretive nature of human trafficking, victims are often hidden in brothels, homes, and businesses. Moreover, law enforcement, social workers, health care professionals, and other authorities rarely encounter victims of human trafficking, both because they are frequently unaware of how to identify potential victims and because victims are intentionally kept out of sight (Diaz, 2006). Even if victims do come into contact with law enforcement or social services, they are usually reluctant to ask for help, partly as a result of psychological coercion but also because they fear retribution from the trafficker (United States Department of Justice [US DOJ], 2006). Many victims come from countries with oppressive governments and are therefore fearful of any type of government official or authority figure (Human Rights Center, 2004).

Those who are trafficked are among the most vulnerable and exploited individuals in the new global economy that spawned this phenomenon. Now more than ever, social workers need a global perspective (Healy, 2001) to understand the issues that are contributing to international migration, including the problem and dynamics of human trafficking. Social workers need to recognize that some of the thousands of trafficked people in the United States will end up as our clients in emergency rooms, domestic violence shelters, mental health facilities, and child welfare systems. To intervene effectively, social workers must become aware of the realities of trafficking. Decision makers seeking to make global migration more humane also need to know about the dynamics and process of trafficking, as well as ways to combat it. It is within this framework—of trafficking in a global context—that this paper is presented.

Defining *trafficking* can be difficult. There is no single, universally accepted definition of *trafficking* (Arnold & Bertone, 2002; IMO, 2000). Trafficking is often confused with smuggling or illegal immigration; it is not synonymous with either, but may involve both. *Smuggling* can be defined as "the facilitation, transportation, attempted transportation, or illegal entry of a person or persons across an international border in violation of American immigration laws" (US DOJ, 2006, pp. 9-10). Sometimes smuggling can turn into trafficking: for example, when people pay to be smuggled into a country, but once there, find that they owe a large debt and are not free to leave. Human traffickers and human smugglers often work together to supply the U.S. labor market with workers (Cole, 2005).

Definitions of *trafficking* found in international and national law emphasize the elements of deception, fraud, and coercion for the purpose of exploitation. The UN defines human trafficking as:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of 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. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, . . . the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs (UN, 2000, art. 3).

The protocol further specifies that consent of the person being trafficked is irrelevant. The protocol affords trafficked persons the status of victims even if they are involved in illegal activities. The UN Trafficking Protocol has received widespread international support, with 117 signatories (The Future Group, 2006).

The debate within the field reflects honest definitional disagreements: for example, over the extent to which coercion and exploitation are necessary elements and whether a

national border need be crossed for an activity to be labeled trafficking (Mekong Region Law Center, 1999). The lack of a common, accepted definition has resulted in much confusion on how governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) ought to respond, confusion about these entities' roles, and difficulty in getting accurate counts of the numbers of trafficked persons.

Definitional issues over human trafficking are further compounded when one examines specific areas of labor exploitation. Prostitution provides perhaps the best and most studied example of the tension over an operational definition of the term. Prostitution arouses major concern because it is usually an illegal activity and carries stigmas that make it more difficult for the trafficked to escape than other types of work. Prostitution is also likely to involve the most vulnerable segments of the population: women and children (Derks, 2000; Hollingsworth, 2003); however, it is important to note that significant numbers of males are also trafficked as sex workers (Leuchtag, 2003).

Most anti-trafficking advocates, service providers, and policy makers believe that all those involved in the sex trade are coerced in some way. They argue that prostitution cannot be regarded as a rational choice, because too often it is a forced choice by those who have no alternatives for economic survival (Leidholdt, 2003). Advocates for trafficked women also stress the issue of exploitation, because traffickers know how to take advantage of a victim's vulnerability. For example, foreign women may agree to enter another as entertainers, but then find themselves functionally helpless in a country with a culture far different from their own, where they are subject to economic pressures and race and gender oppression that may drive them without overt coercion into the sex trade. Women may even agree to be trafficked for prostitution, but when they arrive at their destination they find the conditions to be much worse than they had agreed to or been promised—but they have no way to get out of the deal gone bad or return home.

In contrast, some advocates for women perceive that the issue of trafficking has been used to focus unwanted, unneeded attention on women who have voluntarily chosen to become sex workers, and claim that some trafficked prostitutes might not agree with the victim label (Biemann, 2005).

In the opinion of these commentators, many women who are classified as trafficked have made rational decisions to do sex work, and do not require "rescue." These advocates emphasize the need to educate sex workers about safe sex practices and to monitor the working conditions in brothels and massage parlors (Engstrom, Minas, Espinoza, & Jones, 2004).

Most advocates fall somewhere between these two viewpoints, and seek to intervene on behalf of women who are forced in some way into the sex trade and find themselves unable to leave it because of debt bondage, physical threats, or other coercion. There is, however, uniform consensus among advocates and observers alike that there should be zero tolerance of the trafficking of children for the sex trade (Engstrom et al., 2004).

### Context of Trafficking

Discussions of trafficking make a distinction between sending, transit, and receiving countries. Although *trafficking* can refer to internal movement of people within a country, the main concern appears to be movement across national borders. Some countries, such as Ukraine, are primarily sending countries, whereas other countries, such as the United States, are almost exclusively receiving countries. A few countries, such as Thailand, function as both receivers and senders, as well as facilitators of the transit of trafficked persons.

An effective strategy to defeat trafficking must begin with a better understanding of the global "push" and "pull" factors that promote emigration, including the factors that lure individuals and population groups to wealthier foreign countries and those countries' restrictions on legal immigration. Such constraints and considerations promote alternate migration practices that lead toward exploitation and trafficking.

People are "pushed" out of poor countries where economic opportunity is lacking and "pulled" into countries that have a higher level of economic prosperity with a corresponding demand for cheap labor (Bales, 2005). Many migrate to take advantage of economic opportunity, so that they can send money back home to support their families. Often migrants receive higher wages than they would in their home countries,

even though they are paid less than the prevailing rates in the receiving countries. For example, Thais working in construction in Japan are paid only about 40% of what Japanese workers would get, but this wage can be as much as ten times what these workers would earn in Thailand (Phongpaichait, Piriyarangsan, & Treerat, 1998).

Traffickers play off this push/pull dynamic. They use as recruitment tools the promise of a better life and increased opportunity. Victims of trafficking, who are usually poor and often uneducated, are not in a position to discern beforehand that the promises of economic opportunity are, in fact, lies or gross exaggerations. Ignorance and naïveté, along with dire economic circumstances, make these people vulnerable to traffickers. Indeed, human trafficking represents an acute intersection of vulnerability and exploitation.

Countries that are prone to political unrest, or have weak or corrupt infrastructures combined with widespread poverty, are breeding grounds for international criminal networks (Shelley, 2005). Traffickers dealing arms or involved in the drug trade are quickly learning the increased value of trafficked humans, one of the only commodities on the global market that can be resold and used again. In this regard, Feingold (2005) argues that one must distinguish between ordinary criminal activities and organized crime. Criminal activities can be carried out through good organization, and may last for a certain period of time, but once the work has been completed the group dissolves. Organized crime, in contrast, is undertaken by a stable organization that is involved in various criminal activities; the organization remains viable and functional even if it changes its focus or type of criminal activity. Criminal elements are obviously behind much human trafficking. However, it is organized crime, combined with corrupt officials and governments, that has contributed to the significant growth of this problem on a global scale.

Corruption enables human traffickers to operate successfully, whether through bribes to public officials or collaboration of officials with criminal networks. Officials holding key positions have used their authority to provide protection to those engaged in criminal activities; their complicity can range from simply ignoring illegal activity to blocking legislation

that would counter trafficking (Van Impe, 2000). The success of human trafficking depends on frequent transportation of victims to the many different service sites used every day. Successful trafficking thus requires easy and frequent crossing of borders and utilization of corrupt local officials, both in border crossing and conduct of the often illegal services for which victims are used (Schloenhardt, 2001).

The process of gaining entry to a country is often done under the auspices of criminal networks. Global trafficking involves smuggling persons across national borders, having them enter with fraudulent immigration documents, or (more rarely) having their valid travel documents confiscated after entry. Traffickers then use the "illegal" immigration status of their victims as a tool of exploitation: Subservience of trafficked persons is often achieved through psychological coercion, threats, and physical violence. The perpetrators operate with the knowledge that these migrants have little or no access to social or legal protection (Gushulak & MacPherson, 2000), even when the traffickers have not bribed officials to look the other way. The covert nature of migrants' movement makes trafficked victims dependent on the traffickers. Trafficking victims face many risks, including physical and psychological stress, struggle with an unknown environment, and fear of arrest and imprisonment. All these factors add to the traffickers' power and control.

The intersection of push/pull migratory dynamics with criminal syndicates and corruption is best understood by examining trafficking for prostitution. The demand for these victims is created by the sex industries in the receiving countries. Transnational crime networks, such as the Yakuza in Japan and those that developed after the fall of the Soviet Union, are meeting this need simply because it is a lucrative enterprise. Michael Platzer, of the United Nations Center for International Crime Prevention, said, "Trafficking in women has arguably the highest profit margin and lowest risk of almost any type of illegal activity" (quoted in Hughes, 2000, p. 7).

Coercion occurs when victims are forced into the sex trade as part of a debt-bondage scheme or are held against their will in brothels or other venues of sex work (Skolnik & Boontinand, 1999). Another form of coercion is "bait and switch," a form

of deception in which traffickers trick their victims into cooperating by promising them legitimate jobs (in entertainment or domestic work, for example); when it is too late to change course, these initially willing victims find that the promised jobs were a fiction, and end up, against their will, in sex-work venues (Engstrom et al., 2004). For example, Hughes (2000) reports an Interpol study which estimated that 75% of trafficked Ukrainian women working as prostitutes did not realize that they would be forced into sex work.

Sex trafficking is also fueled by a secondary ruse, in which trafficked women who have managed to return home recruit other women. Women who have been trafficked and trapped into the sex industry have very few, if any, options for escape from enslavement. To escape the horror of being forced to have sex with multiple men every day, some victims make a deal with the traffickers: in exchange for release and a return home, they agree to recruit new victims—thus moving from victim to perpetrator status, even though they often still remain under the control of the traffickers (Hughes, 2000).

### Consequences of Trafficking

First and foremost, human trafficking is a violation of human rights. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights specifies that every person has “inherent dignity” and “freedom.” More specifically, Article 4 states that “no one shall be held in slavery or servitude,” and Article 23 states that “everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work” (United Nations, 1948). Although the 1948 Declaration is not a legally binding document, it provides the moral basis for other human rights conventions that are legally enforceable. From a human rights standpoint, human trafficking violates the principles and articles of the Declaration even if no physical or psychological harm occurs (which is seldom the case).

The consequences of trafficking for victims are huge and far-reaching. Trafficking most often involves the movement of people from their own communities to situations in which they are isolated and dependent on those who are exploiting them. Trafficked persons are subject to being held in debt bondage

and involuntary servitude, often being forced to work for low or no wages in unsafe and unregulated working conditions. Victims of trafficking also often face ill treatment by public authorities that may associate them with criminal activity, such as prostitution or illegal immigration. (Traffickers use this unfortunate fact to consolidate their power over victims, threatening them with arrest, imprisonment, and other official/legal actions if they do not remain subservient.) Those who do return to their place of residence or country of origin may face ostracism for engaging in what is seen as shameful behavior; this is especially true with sex trafficking.

Human trafficking contributes to the weakening of social structures in sending countries by denying individuals access to their immediate and extended families. Moreover, trafficked persons are denied opportunities to further their acquisition of human capital in the form of education and occupational skills; this in turn leads to diminished workforce productivity. At the individual level, Farley (2003) argues that this increases such persons' vulnerability to being retrafficked in the future. At the societal level, the loss of human potential can inhibit national development (US DOS, 2006).

Studies on the state of trafficked women in East Africa, Nepal, and the European Union reflected many victims' reports of widespread rape, forced substance abuse, physical abuse, sexually transmitted infections, HIV / AIDS, and tuberculosis. Health impacts included extreme violence resulting in broken bones, complications related to forced abortions, gastrointestinal problems, lice, suicidal depression, unhealthy weight loss, alcoholism, and drug addiction (US DOS, 2006). Others have noted additional harmful effects of trafficking, such as somatized symptoms (e.g., headaches, back and body aches, dizziness, nausea, vision disturbances) and inability to recuperate and integrate into society (Stewart & Gajic-Veljanoski, 2005).

Ninety-five percent of trafficked victims in the European Union had been violently assaulted or coerced into a sexual act, and more than 60% reported experiencing fatigue, neurological symptoms, back pain, vaginal discharges, and gynecological infections (Hughes, 2000). Consequences of trafficking can include cervical cancer, which is common among women who have frequent sexual encounters with many men (Landesman, 2004).

Landesman (2004) went on to describe yet another layer of coercion, based on the victim's belief (often well-founded) that the traffickers will harm her family if she does not comply with their demands. Victims who are psychologically broken by their traffickers may become loyal to them (a variety of Stockholm syndrome) and may not even identify themselves as victims. Frequently perpetrators employ a combination of abusive methods, including torture, to assert and maintain control over their victims (Perilla, 1999). Experts in the domestic violence field use the concepts of power and control and the cycle of violence to understand the phenomenon. Like perpetrators of domestic violence, traffickers use violence and deception to gain complete control over their victims. These tactics often result in self-blame and learned helplessness on the part of the victim, making it even less likely that victims will seek help or accept it if it should become available (Hopper, 2004). Exposure to chronic trauma can cause depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which also affect a victim's ability to seek help. "A trafficking victim who is experiencing symptoms such as decision-making problems, lack of energy, hopelessness, and feelings of guilt is unlikely to mobilize the resources needed to escape a trafficking situation" (Hopper, 2004, p. 130).

Macro consequences of trafficking for receiving countries include strengthening the hand of organized crime, which can put the overall security of the society at risk. The enormous profit from human trafficking ends up fueling other criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, human smuggling, money laundering, and document forgery (US DOS, 2006). In areas around the globe where organized crime continues to operate successfully, governments are weakened and the rule of law undermined, affecting the social order in those nations in particular and the global society as well.

Orderly and legal immigration may be threatened, and trafficking can feed popular anxieties about immigration and foreigners. It also may deprive sending nations of vital human capital that could be used to spur economic development. In many countries, such as Thailand, trafficking has resulted in a large illegal economy that is well integrated into the country's power structure. This integration fuels corruption and results

in the government having little interest in controlling trafficking (Phongchait, Piriyanangs, & Treerat, 1999). With large pools of illegal workers willing to take low-end jobs in an economy, trafficking may block efforts to improve wages and working conditions.

### Global Response to Human Trafficking

Although human trafficking is not a new problem, the dynamics of globalization are fueling its growth. Preventing the occurrence of human trafficking and remedying its many harms requires a global and regional coalition of countries and nongovernmental organizations. Such a coalition has only recently taken shape, but it is in the process of developing roles and responsibilities and creating organizational infrastructures so that its members may work both collaboratively and unilaterally. The global effort to combat human trafficking is organized around prevention, prosecution, and protection (UNODC, 2006).

*Sending* countries are the focal point of prevention strategies. Economic development, with a special emphasis on women and girls, constitutes perhaps the best long-term approach to combating human trafficking. At the same time, there is a great need for educational outreach programs to alert individuals and communities to the ploys traffickers use and the dangers of being trafficked. Like AIDS education, anti-human trafficking education must be offered repeatedly if it is to have lasting effect.

Prosecution of traffickers also has a strong prevention aspect. Breaking up trafficking networks and imprisoning traffickers stops the recruitment and movement of trafficked persons. Unfortunately, it has been the most difficult of the three strategies to develop and implement (UNODC, 2006). In countries with weak legal systems and corrupt police and courts, investigation of human traffickers is a rare occurrence, and conviction even rarer. Even in countries where the environment for investigation, prosecution, and conviction is favorable, the results have been disappointing. Between 2001 and 2005, the United States successfully convicted only 138 human traffickers (US DOJ, 2006).

Protection first requires identification of victims. As noted previously, police, immigration officers, social workers, and health care workers require training on how to identify victims of trafficking. Because trafficked victims often find themselves residing illegally in a foreign country, efforts have been undertaken to avoid treating them as illegal immigrants. In the past, it was not uncommon for trafficked victims to be placed in immigration detention centers and then deported. Currently, efforts are being made to place trafficked victims in nondetention facilities. The harms of trafficking further require that the mental health and health care needs of trafficked victims be attended to, and that psycho-educational programs be constructed to offer them occupational skills to rebuild their lives.

### Implications for Social Work

Social workers are required by globalization to widen their focus from local and national perspectives, to a worldview that includes global issues such as human trafficking. Trafficking in humans is such an egregious violation of human rights that our professional code of ethics compels us to confront the problem, not only by tending to the victims of trafficking in our communities, but also by working to stop trafficking from occurring in the first place. Social workers must advocate for use of this country's resources and policies in ways that can complement and expand the capacity of countries around the world to counter human trafficking. Moreover, social workers can advocate for women and children by tapping the resources and strengths of the international social work community; by doing so, they help address the problem of human trafficking on multiple fronts. This advocacy requires, at a minimum, establishing and strengthening international collaboration among victim advocates working in the field. Ideally, it entails coordination of policies and services among sending and receiving countries to better aid victims of human trafficking.

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