Human trafficking refers to the trading of human beings for the purpose of forced labor and/or sexual exploitation. It involves acts of transporting, transferring, harboring, or receiving a person through a use of force or coercion, and it is recognized by the United Nations (UN) as a crime against humanity. Every year, tens of thousands of men, women, and children fall into the hands of traffickers, in their countries and abroad. Every country in the world is affected by trafficking, whether as a country of origin, transit, or destination for victims.

Human trafficking is a global industry. It is estimated by the UN that over 2.5 million people are in the forced labor or forced sex trade worldwide, with just over half under the age of 18. People are often trafficked into the agricultural industry, to work as prostitutes in brothels or in the pornography industry, to undertake construction work, to carry out food processing and packaging, to be domestic servants, to aid in drug production and transportation, and for organ harvesting purposes. The U.S. State Department estimates that over 600,000 men, women, and children are trafficked internationally each year as part of the forced labor and sex trade, while perhaps double that number never cross an international boarder. A huge demand exists for human beings for the global sex industry and the exploitable labor industry. Organized criminal networks, black market gangs, and corrupt government officials find it an extremely profitable enterprise. It is the third-largest global business, after the arms and drugs trades, with an estimated annual turnover of over $30 billion.

Causes of Human Trafficking

The causes of human trafficking are complex. Although traffickers can use coercion, deception, and violence, half of the world's population lives in poverty, on less than $2 a day, while a further one billion live in extreme poverty on less than half that amount. Such circumstances provide the socioeconomic structural conditions in which people can easily fall prey to the false hope given by criminals involved in trafficking. Families living in extreme poverty in developing nations in Africa, Asia, and South America often possess few means to resist approaches from the seemingly friendly and helpful traffickers, who are offering them or their children an escape route from a desperate daily struggle to survive. Intimidation and violence may also be used against the victims, or against their families, their friends, and even their neighbors.

Although in more developed countries, such as Russia, and the United States, as well as in Europe, although poverty may be less immediately apparent, it still exists and is a cause of trafficking. However, promises of a life with better educational and/or employment prospects are the more commonly used recruitment methods in these contexts. In addition to the poor and those seeking a better life and new

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opportunities, runaways, refugees, and other displaced people are common victims of trafficking. The struggle against human trafficking is closely related to the ongoing international struggle against poverty, deprivation, debt, social exclusion, famine, gender-based violence, and war.

To ensure complete control of a trafficked person, traffickers typically arrange every aspect of the movement process, including travel documents and tickets, meals, and housing. This allows traffickers to control people through keeping their passports and also enables them to demand labor in return for alleged debts such as travel costs, false registration fees, or administrative costs. This reinforces how traffickers operate as part of large, well-organized criminal networks that include forgers, bogus employment agents, drivers, pimps, brothel owners, and even government and other public officials. Where corruption is endemic in local and national government, or where embassy and immigration officials are incompetent, it is often easy for traffickers to obtain documents and to transport their victims across national frontiers, without being properly checked by border controls.

Responses to Human Trafficking

In response to a growing recognition on behalf of the international community of the important roles played by organized criminal networks operating internationally in the trafficking industry, in 2000, the UN adopted the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. This is also called the Palermo Convention. It contains two key protocols. The first is the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Woman and Children. The second is the Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air. These two protocols represent a concerted effort on behalf of the countries that make up the United Nations to establish an international legislative framework that can tackle the problem of human trafficking, within and across national borders. A 2006 United Nations report, “Trafficking in Persons: Global Patterns,” identified 127 countries of origin, 98 transit countries, and 137 destination countries for human trafficking. It also highlighted the urgent need to address the trafficking of women and children into the sex trade, with South America, Asia, and eastern European countries as sex trafficking hot spots.

The poor, the homeless, adults and children without families, displaced homemakers, runaway teens, refugees, drug addicts, and kidnapping victims make up the majority of trafficking victims. The protocols that make up the Palermo Convention have led to an increase in the development of cross-national work between governments, criminal justice officials, and charitable organizations, such as Stop the Traffik and Amnesty International, with the aim of promoting public service announcements and educational initiatives, alongside coordinating information pertinent to the detection and punishment of individuals who are part of the criminal networks that both engage in, and profit from, human trafficking. For example, in 2008, Ukrainian and United Arab Emirates officials undertook a detailed joint investigation that uncovered a criminal group in the city of Dnipropetrovsk, which trafficked Ukrainian girls and women to the United Arab Emirates. They made at least $2,000 on each girl forced into prostitution. It is estimated that the gang managed to traffic more than 50 Ukrainian young women aged between 16 and 30 to the United Arab Emirates before they were stopped.
Like slaves on an auction block waiting to be selected, prostitutes are on display in front of a go-go bar in Pattaya, Thailand, in 2005. Victims of human trafficking have to perform as they are told, or risk being beaten. Sex buyers often claim they had no idea that most women and girls abused in prostitution are desperate to escape, or are there as a result of force, fraud, or coercion.

The Palermo Convention formed the basis for the development of the UN Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking (GIFT), which was launched in 2007. The development of GIFT into a coordinated trafficking strategy worldwide has revealed that, of the estimated 2.5 million people in forced labor (including sexual exploitation), 56 percent (1.4 million) are in Asia and the Pacific, 10 percent (250,000) in Latin America and the Caribbean, 9.2 percent (230,000) in the Middle East and northern Africa, 5.2 percent (130,000) in sub-Saharan countries, 10.8 percent (270,000) in industrialized countries such as the United States and in Europe, and 8 percent (200,000) in countries in transition. The information collected also revealed that 52 percent of those who recruit victims are men; 42 percent are women, and in 6 percent of cases, both men and women worked together to recruit victims. The statistics also reveal that in just under half of cases (46 percent), the person who recruited a trafficking victim knew the victim.

Typically, such individuals act as local, community-based contacts for trafficking gangs, and so are a point of entry into a broader criminal network, which may well be funded by organized crime syndicates involved in other illegal activity, such as the Mafia, sometimes operating alongside corrupt regional and national government officials. Knowing the relative distribution of the trafficking problem worldwide, alongside identifying how traffickers typically operate, allows for the targeting of resources and information sharing between agencies and countries.

An Anti-Trafficking Policy Index (ATPI) was established by the UN as a result of the Palermo Convention to track and evaluate the success or failure of countries in tackling the problem of trafficking. A five-point scale is used to indicate good policy practices and success in catching and stopping traffickers, with a score of five the highest score and one the lowest. The ATPI has three dimensions relating to prosecuting traffickers, protecting trafficking victims, and preventing trafficking.
in the first place. The ATPI collects annual statistics for 177 countries worldwide, and year-on-year data reveals that antitrafficking policy has improved over the last decade. High-scoring nations include Germany, Norway, Australia, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium, and the United States. France, South Korea, Norway, Croatia, Canada, and Austria also score well. The two worst-scoring nations are North Korea and Somalia.

**Statistical Trends**

The statistical trends that underpin the political and policy making discourse surrounding the problem of human trafficking have been criticized for being misleading. The human trafficking industry forms part of the shadowy black market of illegal activity, and it is therefore impossible to know the true nature and extent of the problem. Most governments and agencies must rely on reasoned guesswork and estimates. This has led to some critics arguing that the number of people trafficked is far less than the estimated 2.5 million, while others argue that it is far more. Similarly, some critics argue that the estimated profit of $30 billion annually that criminal networks allegedly make out of trafficking is grossly overestimated, while others say that the figure is likely higher. Other commentators stress that it is far more important to focus on reducing both the number of individuals who fall victim to traffickers and the profits that traffickers make.

Most charitable groups, such as Amnesty International, argue that worldwide government measures to tackle human trafficking remain woefully inadequate. Although positive steps have been taken over the last decade, there remains a lack of properly funded support for victims of trafficking in many developed nations, let alone in developing countries, with the result that many suffer from discrimination in housing, employment, and social-service provision. Research also shows that victims of trafficking suffer lasting physical, psychological, and emotional damage; can find themselves facing criminal sanctions as a result of their involvement in the drug and sex trades; and in many countries are stigmatized and socially excluded by their local communities once they return to them, particularly if they are female victims of the sex trade. Although some progress has been made over the last decade, much work remains to be done at both the grassroots and international levels to tackle the problem of human trafficking.

**See Also:** Labor Crimes; Organized Crime; Pornography; Prostitution

**Further Readings**


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