**Human Trafficking: Modern Trends of the Slavery Enterprise and the Missing Links**

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The recent discovery of mass graves in Thailand and the estimation by UNHCR that twice as many Rohingya Muslims and Bangladeshis – an estimated 25,000 – boarded people-smugglers boats in the first three months of the year[[1]](#footnote-1) merely highlighted a small corner of this ongoing human tragedy and undervalued security threat.

There is an urgent need to re-evaluate current infrastructure designed to tackle human trafficking, both in terms of preventative, proactive and retrospective policy. This brief will first examine the status of the threat, looking into the realities and impacts of the human trafficking enterprise. By examining international, regional and local initiatives aimed at preventing trafficking, the missing links in current policy will be highlighted, from which a series of policy recommendations will be generated.

Global awareness of human trafficking and its impact on security, development and communities has increased in recent years – but not enough. Strategic attention from international policymakers is urgently required.

1. **The Current State of Play**

Human trafficking is our modern slavery. At a conservative estimate, it claims 2.5million victims at any one time, in every region of the world.[[2]](#footnote-2) One of the most critical and heart wrenching impacts of human trafficking is the social aspect. The conditions victims’ experience, such as torture and deprivation, leads to unprecedented trauma. This trauma often leads to societal stigma, long term emotional impacts and re-victimisation,[[3]](#footnote-3) a phenomenon where victims of human trafficking fall back into the hands of their handlers due to a lack of a way out of the socio-economic situationthat made them vulnerable in the first place.

There are numerous forms of human trafficking. The most common is sexual exploitation followed by forced labour.[[4]](#footnote-4) In May 2014 the ILO estimated that human trafficking generated around $150 billion in illegal annual profits,[[5]](#footnote-5) approximately $99 billion of that coming from commercial sexual exploitation. Given the rise in conflicts around the world, alongside other factors such as the global financial crisis, this amount has undoubtedly risen, along with the number of victims.

Human trafficking has flourished under vast criminal networks[[6]](#footnote-6) that exploit poor governance structures, leaving gaps in the ability to detect and prosecute the perpetrators. In addition, globalisation has contributed to increasingly large and more sophisticated criminal networks that often see the enterprise as a less risky alternative to other forms of crime.[[7]](#footnote-7) Despite the UN and national governments increasingly adopting legislation designed to punish those responsible, often the infrastructure is not comprehensive or well-resourced enough to incite real change at the pace needed.

1. **Real Life Impacts**

The impacts of human trafficking can broadly be placed into four categories: security, economic, social and political.

The mere fact that human trafficking is run by large organised crime networks helps perpetuate other security threats, such as arms proliferation, conflict perpetuation and smuggling. The relationship between arms and human trafficking is often critically interlinked and mutually reinforcing.[[8]](#footnote-8) It is also repeatedly noted that the proliferation of arms has exacerbated the violence associated with the control of these criminal networks.[[9]](#footnote-9) Arms and human trafficking thrive in weak governance and state security structures and in turn perpetuate ongoing conflicts and societal tensions. The fact that there is quick money to be made encourages governmental corruption, which facilitates the advance of criminal networks and their criminal and, at times, terrorist activities. The link between drugs and human trafficking is a historic one and one that is becoming increasingly interlinked, for example in Mexico’s drug cartels.[[10]](#footnote-10) The fact that when people become vulnerable to exploitation, partly down to businesses seeking very low cost workers, human trafficking networks can thrive.[[11]](#footnote-11) This in turn has a detrimental impact on economies as human agency and market flow is compromised.

The huge economic cost of human trafficking is demonstrated by the ILO’s 2009 report ‘The Cost of Coercion’, which estimated that the total financial cost of forced labour, including trafficked victims, would be over US$20 billion (notably, this does not include the cost of sex trafficking).[[12]](#footnote-12) This figure has increased vastly since 2009, notably influenced by conflicts exacerbated by the Arab Spring and the global financial crisis. Determining the exact cost of human trafficking globally is an inherently difficult task, given the clandestine nature of its funding and lack of reporting. The UN notes that the indirect costs, for example resources devoted to prevention, apprehension and prosecution, and support for victims,[[13]](#footnote-13) is another critical economic element which is inherently difficult to assess. Despite the fact that part of this figure can be offset by recovered assets from the perpetrators, the overall costs are hugely disproportionate.

Human trafficking has not only a destabilising impact on security, but also politically. Human trafficking networks fuel political corruption in order to maintain their ability to function without oversight or challenge. United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking (UNGIFT) notes that numerous countries that ranked poorly on Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index also tend to be among the largest source countries for human trafficking victims, including Indonesia, Thailand, Nigeria, the Philippines and Pakistan.[[14]](#footnote-14) The impact on migration policy and border control, alongside migration flows, is significant, encouraging stricter policies as a reactionist measure that has actually increased non-identification and re-victimisation.[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. **Global reactions**

Until recently, the international community failed to fully recognise and act to tackle the accelerating industry of human trafficking and its disastrous consequences. However, the negative security, economic and social impacts have generated unprecedented political momentum aimed at tackling the issue.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The main international mechanisms behind anti-trafficking measures are the UN’s 2000 ‘Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children’[[17]](#footnote-17) and the ‘United Nations Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air’ of 2003/4. These protocols have been very significant international step to produce global language and legislation to define aspects of human trafficking, assist victims and prevent future trafficking.[[18]](#footnote-18) Since then, the UNODC has established UNGIFT (2007) to assist in enforcing these legal instruments.[[19]](#footnote-19) Currently 166 nations have ratified the UN’s primary protocol and this has had significant positive impacts, such as raising global awareness and giving strong legislative guidelines to states.

Since the protocol was adopted, there have been a number of treaties at both regional and national levels aimed at tackling the phenomenon. A very positive example of this was the EU Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims.[[20]](#footnote-20) A number of these regional and national initiatives utilise the definitions detailed in the UN protocol; however, many do not include for example forced labour and have limited or exclusive aspects that reduce their potential effectiveness.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is one of the principal international bodies for tackling human trafficking. The organisation’s primary mechanism is the ‘Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work’ that was adopted by ILO members in 1998.[[22]](#footnote-22) This declaration not only enshrined principles such as ‘freedom from coercion at work, the freedom to set up associations and bargain collectively’ but also gave the ILO a structure for providing technical assistance to states.

The securitization of measures against human trafficking is a trend in some areas. This development could presents a possible threat, as states fail to recognise the importance of more holistic measures, given that security efforts tends to garner more public and media attention for governments. Law and order is certainly an important aspect of combatting human trafficking, be it border security, intelligence work or prosecution of criminal networks. However, there is a danger that this becomes a unifying theme, rather than a more holistic approach which can sufficiently cater to both the underlying causes of human trafficking and the vulnerabilities of traumatised victims.

1. **The Missing Links**

There are numerous instances where political indifference, misunderstanding or lack of knowledge among officials in charge of countering human trafficking have made even sound policy ineffective. The UK is a clear example, where police, social services and the UK Border Agency were shown to have a serious lack of knowledge of the issue, markedly contributing to the rise in instances of human trafficking in the UK over the past few years.[[23]](#footnote-23) In addition, there are several global misperceptions of human trafficking. A common perception is that human trafficking only relates to women and children, given that international campaigns by NGOs and international organisations have often chosen to focus on this area. However, it is clear from statistics that forced labour in particular affects a large number of men.

A lack of resources, training and updated toolkits for public sector officials often results in ineffective controls, misinterpretation of victims, and rising dangers for those at risk. A critical issue resulting from this lack of resources and training is the failures in victim support. The lack of language skills and trauma awareness,[[24]](#footnote-24) for example, can result in traumatic interviews for victims that fail to produce prosecutions and often lands victims either in jail or back in the hands of traffickers. Furthermore, a lack of resources also contributes to a failure to adopt the necessary holistic approach, as it compounds policy into one area, often law enforcement, without tackling the underlying issues that make people vulnerable and that allow traffickers to operate so freely.

This lack of resources also leads to international failure to sufficiently prosecute perpetrators of trafficking. Although 90% of the world’s countries have now criminalised human trafficking, according to the UN ‘fifteen countries had no cases adjudicated in the period from 2010 to 2013, while 25 countries had only one to ten cases adjudicated during the same period.’[[25]](#footnote-25) This compounds the perception that human trafficking is a low risk crime. The fact that other forms of international crime, such as money laundering, are being clamped down more successfully, puts those vulnerable at more risk as criminals turn to trafficking as an easy alternative for big profits.

The global misinterpretation that human trafficking is a problem that arises purely from conflict and that it has not developed into an issue of its own right further adds to the lack of effective measures against human trafficking. As a result of this, although the issue has gained traction internationally, on the national level, police forces and social services have only recently begun to view and deal with the issue as a domestic problem, as well as a global one. There is a need both nationally and internationally to understand that human trafficking arises from a number of phenomenon, such as lack of law enforcement, civil unrest, large-scale poverty, or illiteracy.[[26]](#footnote-26) Each country’s efforts have their own flaws. There are cases such as in the UK, where legislation has been criticised for failing to cater for victims’ aftercare[[27]](#footnote-27) while others have been severely criticised for shortfalls in coordination or for not acting sufficiently.[[28]](#footnote-28) Without understanding one’s own national and regional risks, broad international efforts will be ineffective.

The international element of human trafficking is a key feature, but that does not mean that governments can or should relinquish their responsibilities to the victims, for this only encourages traffickers to take advantage of poor coordination. There have certainly been efforts in the last few years to better coordinate law enforcement, as well as sustained campaigns and efforts to tackle human trafficking – which should be commended, such as the UN’s Inter-Agency Coordination Group Against Trafficking in Persons.[[29]](#footnote-29) However, better coordination between national governments themselves is critical to an effective international regime.

1. **Policy Recommendations**

As a result of poor resources and a lack of knowledge among officials, there is a lack of accurate data to inform critical policy decisions. International agencies must pull national governments together to create comprehensive, detailed and accurate mechanisms that can monitor human trafficking more effectively. Without more effective mechanisms, policymakers will fail to create effective policies that can deal with the reality on the ground. This will necessarily involve additional funding, but the costs of poor policy and ineffective controls have already outweighed such a value.

Concerted national efforts to better inform both policymakers and officials working on the front line are also needed. Ignorance has fuelled the increase in human trafficking and promoted the view amongst criminals that this is a low risk operation. However, human trafficking is not an isolated issue, it perpetuates other crime such as arms proliferation, as well as conflict and social tension. More holistic approaches driven by well-informed officials will contribute to strengthened legal measures and prosecutions, better protection for those at risk and, in the longer term, closing the space open to human trafficking. By closing this space, policy makers can also make inroads into other criminal activities and conflict, as the interlinked nature of these global crimes means they cannot be tackled in isolation. Part of this initiative must involve the private sector through increasing awareness of the link between trafficking for labour purposes and the demand for very low cost workers, as well as increasing detection and prosecution of businesses ignoring the rules.

Sustained international focus on human trafficking is critical and cannot be foregone. However, international co-operation and campaigns must be supplemented by local initiatives. Human trafficking takes varying forms and to use a blanket mechanisms for all would be foolish. Instead, governments must be aware of their specific local and regional vulnerabilities, rather than make assumptions based on global norms, and ensure that local officials are equipped with specific toolkits to tackle the situation on a daily basis.

Given the extensive trauma suffered by victims of human trafficking, there is a considerable need for community driven, bottom up programmes designed to help victims escape traffickers and rebuild their lives. Education is also a crucial aspect of this community approach. By educating local communities in vulnerable areas on the dangers, signs and consequences of human trafficking, more comprehensive and locally owned directives could help prevent further escalation.

It is also clear that more research must be done to determine the underlying trends, vulnerabilities and pitfalls associated with human trafficking. Above all, the international community must learn from its mistakes. In our globalised world there is little room for repeating past failures. Policy makers must seek to build on successes and actively work to learn from others mistakes, as well as their own. Given the scale that human trafficking has reached, the drive to eliminate the phenomenon will be a long road, but that is never an excuse for complacency. As the world slowly recovers from the economic recession, we must remember those for whom the recession has put more at risk and ensure that we combine our economic recovery with increased protection of the most vulnerable.

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