



World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance

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The Race Dimensions of Trafficking in Persons— Especially Women and Children

In a slowing global economy, one sector is bucking the trend. Each year, millions of individuals, the majority women and children, are tricked, sold, coerced or otherwise forced into situations of exploitation from which they cannot escape. They are the commodities in a multi-billion dollar global industry dominated by highly organized criminal groups operating with impunity.

The “new slave trade”, as Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo called it at a conference in Lagos last February, has grown recently in severity and in magnitude. Reliable figures are hard to come by, but it is estimated that 45,000 to 50,000 women and children are trafficked annually to the United States alone. Increasing economic hardship, particularly in developing and transitional countries, onerous obstacles to legal migration and serious armed conflict have coincided with a rise in the number of trafficking cases as well as a spreading of the problem to areas which were previously less affected.

Trafficking is a phenomenon that affects and implicates all regions and most countries of the world. While trafficking routes are constantly changing, one constant factor is the economic distinction between countries of origin and countries of destination. As with all other forms of irregular migration, trafficking invariably involves movement from a poorer country to a wealthier one. Southeast Asian women are trafficked to North America and other Southeast Asian countries. African women are trafficked to Western Europe. The breakup of the former Soviet Union and the resulting economic and political dislocation has led to a dramatic increase in the number of women trafficked from Central and Eastern Europe.

Trafficking will also flourish during and after protracted social conflict. The former Yugoslavia has become a primary trafficking

destination as well as an important transit and processing centre for women from central and Eastern Europe. There is evidence to suggest that during the Kosovo crisis, women and girls were kidnapped by armed gangs or otherwise lured from the refugee camps of Northern Albania. Several international organisations have reported that trafficking to and from Kosovo and other parts of the Former Yugoslavia is now on the rise in response to a perceived demand for prostitution on the part of wealthy foreign workers, including United Nations peacekeepers.

How Trafficking Happens

Traffickers use a variety of recruitment methods including outright abduction and purchase from family members. However, in most cases, the potential trafficking victim is already seeking a chance to migrate when she is approached by an acquaintance or lured through an advertisement. Some are tricked into believing they are being recruited for legitimate employment or marriage abroad. Others know they are being recruited into the sex industry and even that they will be obliged to work in order to pay back large recruitment and transportation fees but are deceived about their conditions of work. The web of dependence is a complex one. Traffickers generally seek to exercise control over a victim’s legal identity by confiscating her passport or official papers. Her entry or stay in the destination country is usually illegal – serving to increase her reliance on the traffickers. Debt bondage is widely used to control trafficked persons and to ensure their continued profitability. Physical restraint, violence, and intimidation are frequently reported.

Traffickers are rarely apprehended and even more rarely prosecuted. Penalties for trafficking are relatively light when compared to the smuggling of drugs or weapons. Once reason for the poor law enforcement response



to trafficking is the low incidence of reporting. This is not difficult to understand. Victims of trafficking are rarely treated as anything other than criminals by the authorities of the receiving state and are often detained, prosecuted, and deported. This reality, combined with a fear of reprisals from traffickers, means that trafficked persons have little incentive to cooperate with law enforcement authorities in the destination countries. A lack of knowledge of legal rights and entitlements, cultural and linguistic obstacles and the absence of support mechanisms combine to further isolate trafficked women and to prevent them from seeking or receiving justice.

The Critical Link Between Trafficking and Racial Discrimination

Although the links between trafficking and racial bias are not immediately clear they are nonetheless undeniable. As UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson put it, "Trafficking is ... inherently discriminatory. In the case of trafficking into the global sex industry, we are talking about men from relatively prosperous countries paying for the sexual services of women and girls – and sometimes man and boys – from less wealthy countries. This is more than a labour rights issue or an issue of unequal development. It is a basic human rights issue because it involves such a massive and harmful form of discrimination".

Because the overwhelming majority of trafficked persons are women, trafficking is usually considered to be a gender issue and the result of discrimination on the basis of sex. It is rarely analyzed from the perspective of race discrimination. There has been little discussion of whether race, or other forms of discrimination, contribute to the likelihood of women and girls becoming victims of trafficking. However, when attention is paid to which women are most at risk of being trafficked, the link of this risk to their racial and social marginalization becomes clear. Moreover, race and racial discrimination may not only constitute a risk factor for trafficking, it may also determine the treatment that women experience in countries of destination. In addition, racist ideology and racial, ethnic and gender discrimination may create a demand in the region or country of destination which could contribute to trafficking in women and girls.

The connections between trafficking and racial discrimination has been the focus of much of the preparation for the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, to take place in Durban, South Africa, in the autumn. During last September's Asia-Pacific Seminar of Experts in Preparation for the World Conference, Thailand emphasized the interaction of gender and racial discrimination. According to the country's delegation, some women of certain racial or ethnic groups were subjected to abuses in larger measure than other women, while particular forms of violations, such as trafficking in women and girls frequently involved racist attitudes and perceptions, and were often directed at certain racial and ethnic groups, indigenous women and migrants.

Participants at the Bangkok meeting also agreed that racist ideology fuels trafficking and that the "commodification" of women's sexuality results in abuse of women and girls. The experts called for widespread awareness raising regarding the reality and scope of trafficking, including the use of deceit and force to imprison and coerce victims. Governments were urged to combat racism and trafficking and political leaders called on to refrain from utterances that could encourage racism. An expert group meeting on gender and racial discrimination (Zagreb, Croatia, 21-24 November, 2000) recommended that the World Conference pay specific attention to the issue of gender in considering its themes and to take into account the intersection between gender discrimination and racial discrimination.

Conclusion

There are no easy solutions to the plague of trafficking, but its magnitude requires quick action. As High Commissioner Mary Robinson has stated, combating the phenomenon will require holistic, interdisciplinary and long-term approaches which address each aspect of the trafficking cycle and which recognize explicitly the connections between trafficking, migration, racism and racial discrimination. This job has only recently begun, and taking it forward will be one of the challenges before the delegates at the Durban conference. They will have little room for failure – the fate of millions of women and children around the world is the balance.

To know more about the World Conference check its website at www.unhchr.ch/html/racism/index.htm. For further information call (212) 963-3771 or e-mail vasic@un.org.