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The Fall Into Prostitution: The Targeting of Migrants and Children in Sex Trafficking/Sexual
Slavery in Latin American Countries

There are varying types of slavery in Latin America such as drug mules who carry drugs at force for dealers or people who are forced to work for gangs under the threat of being killed. A large fraction of slavery in Latin America is based in the sex slave industry and what makes this so compelling and complex is the background as to why these people were forced to become prostitutes. Reasoning behind sex slavery in Latin American countries is the poverty of many countries that force people into a situation wherein they are forced to become sex trafficked.

The motivating factor behind sex trafficking is often that women wanting to be smuggled out of the country will find themselves being taken advantage of and forcibly trafficked. What often happens is that women will pay to be smuggled out of their country, typically into the United States. Once out of their country or in a different region (a person from Guatemala is moved to northern Mexico), their smugglers will kidnap them and force them into the sex trade.¹ Another common occurrence is that smugglers will make migrants pay an extra transport cost.

¹ Jeremy Haken, "Transnational Crime in the Developing World," *Global Financial Integrity* (2011): 17, http://www.gfintegrity.org/storage/gfip/documents/reports/transcrime/gfi_transnational_crime_web.pdf

As they would have spent all their money on to be smuggled, they are unable to pay those costs and it is then that the smugglers will force women into prostitution to pay.² Even though these women may have entered the sex trade with a sort of a choice, once in, they often cannot ever escape. They will be threatened by the brothel owners or they will be threatened by their smugglers, who have information about their family to hold against them.³ Even if they could leave the sex trade, they would have no money, no familiarity with the region, and no way to get home.⁴ What they would likely have is a sexually transmitted disease such as HIV/AIDS and/or a drug addiction as both are common of women in the Latin sex trade.⁵

It is not only Latin American women who fall into this trap (but those who do a notably of a darker complexion being of Indigenous descent as they are more likely to be taken advantage of than light skinned Latinas); women from developing countries in eastern Europe are also trafficked.⁶ They fall into a similar situation as Latina migrants in that they were told that they would be smuggled and were then made by their smuggler to pay transport fees or simply

² Ibid.

³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment* (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012), 57.

⁴ Ibid, 58.

⁵ Jeremy Haken, "Transnational Crime in the Developing World," *Global Financial Integrity* (2011): 20, http://www.gfintegrity.org/storage/gfip/documents/reports/transcrime/gfi_transnational_crime_web.pdf; Taina Bien-Aime, "'How Did I Get Here?'- A Photographer Captures Women in Mexico's Brothels," *Coalition Against Trafficking in Women*, July 31, 2017, <http://www.catwinternational.org/Home/Article/712-how-did-i-get-here-a-photographer-captures-women-in-mexicos-brothels>.

⁶ Taina Bien-Aime, "'How Did I Get Here?'- A Photographer Captures Women in Mexico's Brothels," *Coalition Against Trafficking in Women*, July 31, 2017, <http://www.catwinternational.org/Home/Article/712-how-did-i-get-here-a-photographer-captures-women-in-mexicos-brothels>; Jeremy Haken, "Transnational Crime in the Developing World," *Global Financial Integrity* (2011): 18, http://www.gfintegrity.org/storage/gfip/documents/reports/transcrime/gfi_transnational_crime_web.pdf.

forced into the sex trade.⁷ These women are brought to Latin America, typically destinations such as Panama and Costa Rica, and sold into sex slavery there.⁸

It is not known for sure how extensive the sex slave industry is in Latin American countries, but it is believed that thousands of women and young girls are victims of sex trafficking. Certain countries, such as Mexico and Guatemala, experience very high volumes of sex trafficking. There are 48,500 people in Guatemala who are forced into sexual slavery according to the United Nations Children's Fund and Casa Alianza, an organization that provides support for Latino children who have, among other things, been victims of the sex industry, believes that 15,000 children are sex trafficked in Guatemala alone.⁹ The issue of sex slavery and of child sexual slavery is no small issue if these numbers are even close to the volume of trafficking that occurs. Children that are trafficked typically are from the country in which they are trafficked but women are often from bordering countries or from eastern Europe, which makes tracking them and gathering information even more difficult.¹⁰ It also suggests that even if international trafficking were to cease, because children are trafficked from within and are

⁷ Haken, 17

⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 55

⁹ United Nations Children's Fund and Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala (CICIG), Human Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation Purposes in Guatemala, 2016, at http://www.cicig.org/uploads/documents/2016/Trata_Ing_978_9929_40_829_6.pdf. quoted in Clare Ribando Seelke, *Trafficking in Persons in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Congressional Research Service, October 13, 2016, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33200.pdf>, 9; Casa Alianza Mexico quoted in United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment* (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012), 56.

¹⁰ Clare Ribando Seelke, *Trafficking in Persons in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Congressional Research Service, October 13, 2016, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33200.pdf>, 8.

targeted due to the poverty and neglect in Latin countries, child sexual slavery would likely continue until the standard of living in these countries were to change.

While it is nearly impossible to track the real number of victims of the sex slave industry, there was an estimated 1,400,000 sex slaves in 2004 according to the International Labor Organization, a number which is sure to have grown significantly since then.¹¹ While this number extends globally, it is still largely significant as the sex trade is not isolated but rather a complex and interconnected industry with slaves being brought into Latin America from destinations such as eastern Europe and with Latin American slaves being taken to destinations such as Asia, another region where the sex trade is booming.¹²

The sex trade industry is an industry wherein it is not the number of victims that is the most shocking and the biggest deterrent to its ending, but rather the money made from the industry. Sex slavery is a multi-billion dollar industry that profits the people who run it greatly; the victims are not paid and they last for years or decades, given that they do not die of sexually transmitted disease, neglect, drug overdose, or violence (sexual or gang/crime related) first.¹³ White women from Eastern Europe are prized and their services cost more given their relative rarity.¹⁴ Indigenous women are cheap and abused by their customers regularly, but as they live in deep poverty in Latin countries and are thus more vulnerable to becoming slaves, Indigenous prostitutes are a dime a dozen.¹⁵

¹¹ Haken, 18.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Bien-Aime.

¹⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 58.

¹⁵ Bien-Aime.

The actual profits of the sex trade industry are astounding. In the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime threat assessment of “Transnational Organized Crime in Central America,” they included the results of a study and elaborated on what it meant on a large scale application.

“In terms of client loads, one study of 94 sex workers in the region found that in a seven-day period, they provided 1,343 sexual services, or an average of 14 per sex worker per week. If all the trafficked sex workers were equally exploited, they would provide a total of almost 2.5 million illegal services per year. Using the high-end massage parlor rate of US\$15 per hour for each of these services, this would amount to a market size of about US\$37.5 million per year.”

Even though each sex worker averaged about two sexual acts per day, combined and over a year, they are able to make a sizeable amount of profit. To put it into perspective, if a sex worker averages 14 sexual services per week and they charge at a rate of \$15, a single sex worker can make around \$10,920 annually. If that sex worker is a sex slave and they are being forced to perform much more than two sexual acts a day, it is no wonder that sex trafficking is a booming industry. Overall, the International Labor Organization reported that sexual exploitation could be a 27.8 billion dollar industry globally and it would not be surprising to find that that number has increased significantly in the 13 years since it was reported.¹⁶

The trafficking of people in and into the Americas has been an industry that has unfortunately lasted the test of time, albeit mutating into a different industry than was seen in the 17th and 18th centuries. Geography aside, the similarities between the type of trafficking

¹⁶ Haken, 18.

explored in *Inhuman Traffick* and the type explored in this paper lies in the people targeted for enslavement.

Children were targeted in internal African trade and children are similarly targeted in internal sex slavery in Latin America. Children were targeted by slavers in Africa because they found that children were more willing to submit to their owners than grown men and women.¹⁷ While few children were shipped overseas, due to both the American's preference for adult slaves and limited supply due to intercontinental child slave trade, it did form the idea that children were best for domestic trade. In the modern Americas, children are similarly valued. Children are typically scouted from within their own countries for sexual slavery.¹⁸ They can start sex work immediately, whether it is pornography or performing sexual acts, and as they are children, they are much more vulnerable and thus will rely on their owners more than an adult would.¹⁹ Young sex slaves will also have a lower tolerance to drugs and so their owners can more easily inebriate them and get them hooked on drugs which will only make them more dependant on the owners.

Intercontinental African slave trade also saw the preference of women to be sold as slave just as the Latin American slave trade sees a preference for women. Sub-Saharan buyers preferred women, of course, for the opportunity to sexually abuse and assault them, but they also realized the agricultural skills that women in African possessed over the men.²⁰ Obviously, women are the main victims of the slave trade but when migrants wish to be smuggled out of a

¹⁷ Rafe Blaufarb and Liz Clarke, *Inhuman Traffic: The International Struggle Against the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Graphic History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 9.

¹⁸ Seelke, 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Blaufarb and Clarke, 11.

country, it is much more often women and children who will become trafficked rather than men. Women and children will be the ones either forced directly into slavery or the ones told that they have to pay a cost. Often times, they will begin as labour slaves but will soon be forced into sexual slavery. Men can also be labour slaves, but women and children can easily be set to sex work at the will of their “smuggler,” now owner, whereas the market for male sex slaves is not nearly as popular.²¹

Sexual slavery is an issue that cannot be ignored in those countries and cannot be ignored globally. Sex slavers take away working people from the economy and lower the country’s production potential, something that is a detriment as seen in Sub-Saharan Africa as a result of the slave trade there. This ruins the economy of a country, causes for more people to become poor and vulnerable to sex slavers’ tactics, creating a cycle that will cause the ruin of many Latin American countries. The fact that sex trade in Latin America spreads to other countries makes it even more of a global issue.

²¹ Haken, 17.

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