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Abstract

This paper examines the prevalence of sex trafficking in Asia and considers factors that make it stand out among other regions of the world. It explains the consequences of poorly designed policy on sex trafficking, using the Chinese One Child Policy as an example. It also looks at the lack of economic opportunity in countries like Thailand and Cambodia, that can incentivize the selling of women to traffickers. Finally, this paper considers the role of globalization in making the transport of sex trafficking victims easier as well as the effect of modern communication technologies on trafficking.

Keywords

Sex Trafficking, Asia, Policy, Globalization, Economic Opportunity

Disciplines

Asian Studies | East Asian Languages and Societies | Women's Studies

Comments

Student research paper written for WGS 225: Gender & Global Migration.

Sex Trafficking in Asia: The Impact of Policy, Economic Opportunity, and Globalization

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Abstract

This paper examines the prevalence of sex trafficking in Asia and considers factors that make it stand out among other regions of the world. It explains the consequences of poorly designed policy on sex trafficking, using the Chinese One Child Policy as an example. It also looks at the lack of economic opportunity in countries like Thailand and Cambodia, that can incentivize the selling of women to traffickers. Finally, this paper considers the role of globalization in making the transport of sex trafficking victims easier as well as the effect of modern communication technologies on trafficking.

Sex Trafficking in Asia

Women and young children are sold, tricked, and kidnapped into sexual slavery in Asia with alarming frequency. Many women and children each year find themselves trapped, and abused for their sexuality. These people often come from poorer countries with few resources or opportunities for employment and even lesser legal protections for victims. Poor international and domestic policy, little economic opportunity, and globalization trends leave women and young children especially vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers in Asia.

Poor policy, both domestically and internationally directly contribute to the prevalence of sex trafficking in Asia. Internationally, the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (also called the Palermo Protocol) in 2000 was the first major global treaty in modern times that addressed trafficking. This treaty officially recognized sex trafficking on a global scale, and resulted in 69 governments passing anti-trafficking legislation domestically (Smith, 2011). However, while this agreement was instrumental in bringing new awareness and resources to combating sex trafficking, it did not go far enough. It focused on creating penalties for those convicted of trafficking people but did not consider protections for potential victims of trafficking. It only required that states support the criminalization of trafficking rather than additionally asking that states enact laws making it harder for women to be trafficked (Smith, 2011). The Palermo Protocol, while important, did not address the root causes of sex trafficking, like poverty and economic opportunity. Rather than preventing the exploitation of women, it reacted to sex trafficking after it took place. While it is important to recognize that international law is often vague in order to entice many nations to agree to it, this blanket criminalization of trafficking did not take the necessary concrete steps to address the real causes of sex trafficking in Asia and around the world.

In addition to inadequate international treaties, poor domestic initiatives and policies in Asia have contributed to an increase in sex trafficking within the region. The Chinese One Child Policy is one of these such policies. While the policy did serve to limit their population, as was its intention, it also resulted in a national gender imbalance. Limited to one child per family, the Chinese favored boys who were seen as more socially and economically valuable. It became common practice to abandon or abort female babies in the hopes of getting a boy. Overtime, there became a noticeable difference in the number of males and the number of females, with some estimating a shortfall in the female population of between 30-40 million people (Barr, 2019). When these men came of age, many were not able to find wives and thus were unable to start families. In the face of this conundrum, men turned to the sex trade in southern Asia, many paying up to \$13,000 USD for a bride. These unfortunate women were often taken from poorer countries in south east Asia, Myanmar being a common location, and brought to China. While few arrived of their own free will, most were kidnapped, sold, or tricked into this sex trade. Once they were united with their 'husbands,' most women were raped until they became pregnant and gave birth to a son. After being exploited and used transactionally, many women were allowed to leave the country under the condition that they renounce their relation to the child. However, upon arriving at the Chinese border, intending to travel south, many were detained for immigration offences allegedly committed upon entering the country (Barr, 2019). The lives of women were upended, leaving them detained with little or no money, and dealing with trauma on their own. This is just one example of the devastating consequences of policy that is not thoroughly researched and thoughtfully considered. Without understanding the secondary and tertiary effects of limiting the birth rate, China inadvertently caused an explosion in the Asian sex trade and did little to provide for the victims of their mistake. In attempting to return to their

homes, released women were stopped and questioned by Chinese authorities for crimes committed against their will. Both the One Child Policy in China and the country's ensuing lack of border protections for victims worsened the sex trade and the lives of those unfortunate enough to be entangled in it.

Similarly, weak laws in Cambodia did not protect or help people vulnerable to sex trafficking. Much like the Palermo Protocol, the Cambodian Law on the Suppression of Kidnapping, Trafficking, and Exploitation of Human Persons, focused on prosecuting traffickers without offering assistance to victims (Davy, 2014). This piece of legislation, while a landmark in its criminalization of sex trafficking and its focus on the trafficking of women and children, failed to protect victims. It increased the burden placed on non-governmental organizations and other advocacy groups within Cambodia to assist victims. These organizations were responsible for establishing rehabilitation centers, programs, and counseling for survivors of sex trafficking in addition to lobbying the government for stricter anti-trafficking laws. The government must take up a larger share of the work to end sex trafficking as well as enact policies that address the causes of trafficking rather than its outcomes.

The high level of intra-regional trafficking in Asia is also driven by socioeconomic factors that limit opportunities for women (Larsen, 2010). Due to years of conflict and foreign intervention in south Asia, there exists extreme poverty for a portion of the population. With little opportunity for work or advancement, many families turn to the sex trade to make ends meet. Unable to afford basic necessities, some families resorted to selling their young children (boys and girls) into the sex trade. In other cases, young girls were put into debt bondage, in which a family provides a niece or daughter to a trafficker until their debt has been paid (Davy, 2014). This practice, while helping some member of a family, has the potential to destroy a

young girls' life. Enduring such sexual trauma at a young age makes any future extremely difficult. Additionally, a large population of young unemployed people in poorer countries often leaves women without work because of gendered discrimination. These unemployed women occasionally try to migrate to another country but are tricked or manipulated into the sex industry. Rather than ensure safe passage to a more prosperous country, smugglers (traffickers) bring young women to a new country and upon entry sell them into sex slavery against their will (Davy, 2014). A lack of employment opportunities for people coupled with extreme poverty, puts people into desperate situations in which families would do almost anything (including sell their children) to make money for basic necessities like food and shelter. This lack of options also causes young women to migrate and opens the door for traffickers to take advantage of their poor and desperate situations. Without stronger economic opportunities in these poorer countries, sex trafficking will continue to appeal to those with little resources.

Finally, globalization of the world has contributed to the sex trafficking industry within Asia. The cost of transportation has significantly decreased in recent years, making international flights and long-distance train rides quicker and more affordable than ever before. The communications revolution and advances in cellphone, internet, and web browsing technology have made it much easier for people to keep in touch with others halfway around the world. This interconnectedness has made Asia a destination for sex tourism, a practice wherein foreigners and domestic tourists visit a location with the express purpose of paying for sexual encounters (Huda, 2006). While it may seem odd, this phenomenon can be explained by the relative affordability of traveling in a country like Thailand or Cambodia as well as many power, class, and legal factors that make it easier for westerners to pay for sex in a foreign country. Research has shown that tourists often feel freed from their home country's social norms while abroad and

are thus more likely to engage with sex workers. They feel less stigma, in part due to the culture of these countries but also less fear because of the legality and prevalence of sex workers. There becomes a further incentive to engage in this activity when the dollar is so strong in south Asian countries. Westerners feel more wealthy and powerful than they might in the US and are thus more likely to spend that money on an illicit and taboo activity (Chang & Chen, 2012). Sex tourism in Asia has become a booming business, bringing in much needed capital to poorer countries. This profitability has encouraged governments to loosen restrictions on sex trafficking and the sex industry resulting in further exploitation of women in vulnerable positions.

Globalization has resulted in increased connection between poorer countries in Asia and wealthier western countries that allows and encourages further exploitation of women and girls in the sex industry. This sex tourism has now increased the likelihood of girls and women being trafficked out of Asia and into wealthier western nations. Often young women are trafficked into western nations posing as the brides or fiancés of men who have paid traffickers large fees (Chang & Chen, 2012). These young women are left in foreign nations, far from home, and all alone with men who they cannot trust. The consequences of globalization on sex trafficking are large, and put vulnerable women into positions of helplessness, powerlessness, and fear.

Sex trafficking is an undoubtedly complex process, influenced by cultural norms, economic opportunity, globalization, and both international and domestic politics. While there are numerous factors that contribute to the prevalence of sex trafficking within Asia, the most important relate to increased global connection, little socioeconomic opportunity, and legislation that does not adequately support victims. In order to properly address these issues and ensure that women are not exploited for their sexuality, new laws and policies must be written that protect their rights. Additionally, the economies of poorer countries must be revitalized in order to bring

people out of poverty and away from the pull of the sex trade. With international and domestic cooperation, the sex industry in Asia can be reduced and the lives of countless women and children improved.

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