

Misconceptions about human trafficking in a time of crisis

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Both natural and man-made crises are considered by many to be prime environments for trafficking in persons. However, the evidence for this is thin.

The relevant Protocols define people smuggling and trafficking differently¹ but in reality smuggling and trafficking networks are not distinct and many trafficking situations start as smuggling. Therefore, smuggling and trafficking should be thought of as interrelated phenomena – on a continuum from tolerable forms of labour migration to trafficking – perhaps particularly in the context of humanitarian crises when individuals in physical danger or dire economic situations might be actively seeking out smugglers to facilitate their migration from crisis-affected areas.

We feel that [recent] disasters disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable sectors of society – whether that's migrants, job seekers, or poor families – making them primary targets for exploitation and enslavement.

Luis CdeBaca, US Ambassador-at-Large, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 24 May 2010

Interestingly, trafficking stories became attached to the disaster narrative in the context of the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. While the tsunami did not create rumours about trafficking, it started a reporting trend. Similar stories about increased trafficking of women and children continue to be repeated in the context of other crises. Western media reports that, for example, criminal gangs were befriending children orphaned by the tsunami and selling them to sex traffickers are contradicted by experts who have said that there was virtually no increase in verified incidents of human trafficking in countries hit by the tsunami. After Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008, a UNICEF spokesman said: "We've had no reports of an increase in trafficking numbers. If there were such

report[s] I would be cautious about using [them] since there are no accurate figures on the numbers of people who are trafficked on a regular basis prior to the cyclone."²

The fear of increased vulnerability of Haitian children in the aftermath of the earthquake of 2010 was thought to be understandable given the trade of children in Haiti which existed before. Unfortunately many of the trade networks have links with the international adoption 'market'. The association of child trafficking with inter-country adoption might strike some readers as obvious, others as offensive, but in the context of the aftermath of the earthquake it provoked exaggerated stories of child kidnapping for international adoptions.

Interestingly, other natural or manmade disasters have sparked few concerns about human trafficking, showing that there are inconsistent assumptions about which crises and populations are most vulnerable to trafficking. The 2012 nuclear crisis in Japan, for example, did not cause speculations about trafficking.

Scholarly literature on trafficking in persons in armed conflict is robust in terms of policy and legal analysis but very limited in terms of empirical data on actual cases of trafficking. Reports issued by human rights groups and humanitarian assistance organisations working in conflict and post-conflict situations tend to discuss risks for trafficking related to perceived vulnerabilities mainly of children and do not provide reliable data on the prevalence of trafficking in conflict and post-conflict situations, although there is some evidence of the increased demand for sex workers by military

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and peacekeeping personnel. The question remains whether these reports conflate increased demand for sex workers with increase in trafficking for sexual exploitation.

In the current Syrian context, the label 'trafficking' is often used where a more nuanced discussion about gender inequalities and exploitation of vulnerable women would be warranted.

There seems to be a considerable difference between what media and advocates in the global North stress and what reports originating in the global South emphasise. After the Indian Ocean tsunami, when the media frenzy died down, UNICEF commissioned assessments of media reporting of the disaster which noted that local newspapers in Indonesia and Sri Lanka were very suspicious of stories of child trafficking from the beginning.

Anti-trafficking initiatives must encompass efforts to prevent trafficking for different forms of labour, not merely for sexual

exploitation. In both cases – sex and labour trafficking – attention needs to focus also on men and boys, not just on girls and young women. Although the root causes of trafficking, including poverty, underdevelopment and a lack of viable livelihoods, are exacerbated by crises, empirical data corroborating the hypothesis that trafficking in persons will increase significantly during crises is lacking. Without outcome and impact evaluations of existing anti-trafficking strategies, international and local actors will continue to design prevention strategies in an empirical vacuum.

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1. The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4720706c0.html> and the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air <http://tinyurl.com/Migrant-Smuggling-Protocol>
2. <http://tinyurl.com/IRIN-Myanmar-trafficking>