



Trafficking of women and girls within Central America

With tens of thousands of people migrating irregularly, it is not surprising that some of this migration leads to exploitation.⁶⁰ As soon as migrants leave home soil with the intent of moving undetected, they enter into a shadowy world. They place their lives in the hands of strangers who flout the law, and many pay dearly for this decision. Women are particularly vulnerable: female irregular migrants comprise around 20% of the migrant pool.

Most of the Central American trafficking victims detected in Central America have been trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation, but it is unclear whether this is representative of the larger victim pool. Local laws may specifically prohibit sexual exploitation but remain vague about other forms of labour. It may be that investigators prioritize the search for sexually exploited victims, or that they are simply more visible. To sell sexual services, traffickers need some sort of public face, whether it is location in a red light district or some kind of advertising. Clients, concerned by what they see, may feel compelled to report abuses to the authorities. Proprietors of sweatshops or labour camps, on the other hand, can perform their operations in isolation, and are thus more likely to avoid exposure.

Labour trafficking does occur, but these cases represent less than 10% of the victims detected in the region, so little is known about these markets. Trafficking of Central American men and women into agricultural labour in Mexico is more common, but sex trafficking near the border is also widespread. And while sexual exploitation of males does

occur, these cases are relatively small in number. For these reasons, this chapter focuses on trafficking in women and girls for the purposes of sexual exploitation.

What is the nature of this market?

There appear to be at least two distinct submarkets for the trafficking of women and girls in the region. One involves waylaid irregular migrants, a problem particularly concentrated in the Mexican province of Chiapas and in Guatemala. The second is in the south, in Costa Rica and Panama, where women are trafficked from much farther afield to cater for wealthier interests. There is also domestic trafficking in most of the countries of the region, but relatively little is known about this practice.

The situation along the Guatemala-Mexico border has been well documented. According to a study undertaken by CEIDA (*Centro de Estudios y de Investigación en Desarrollo y Asistencia Social*), Chiapas is the Mexican state most vulnerable to human trafficking.⁶¹ The victims are mostly irregular migrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. They are exploited in bars and brothels, and their clientele is mostly local.⁶² Since there is no reason to think that demand for paid sex is higher in Chiapas than in other parts of the country, this appears to be a supply-driven market. The Mexican government has identified scores of Guatemalans who had been trafficked in recent years, although many of these were agricultural workers.

⁶⁰ Under the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, a key element in the crime of “trafficking in persons” is “exploitation”, including sexual exploitation, forced labour, and the removal of organs.

⁶¹ Índice Mexicano sobre la vulnerabilidad ante la trata de personas, CEIDAS, México, 2010.

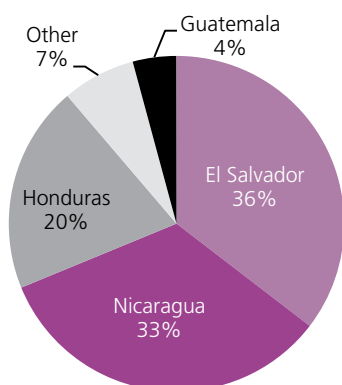
⁶² Estudio diagnóstico de la situación de violencia y vulnerabilidad de las mujeres migrantes en Chiapas, Instituto Estatal de las Mujeres de Chiapas, México, 2008.

The Guatemalan situation is very similar to that in Chiapas, and appears to be comprised of irregular migrant women and girls who somehow fell through the cracks. Even more so than in Mexico, however, the emphasis seems to be on young girls. At least 15,000 children are the victims of child sex trafficking networks in Guatemala, according to estimates from the NGO Casa Alianza.⁶³ In Guatemala City alone, Casa Alianza identified more than 2,000 children sexually exploited in bars and massage parlours, most coming from neighbouring Central American countries. A network of NGOs working for children's rights, ECPAT, reported that children in Guatemala aged between eight and fourteen were sold for between US\$100 and US\$200, primarily for sexual exploitation.⁶⁴

Unlike most other countries and in stark contrast to the situation in Chiapas, only a small minority (4%) of the human trafficking victims detected in Guatemala are Guatemalan. Most (89%) are from El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras, strongly suggesting a link to northward migration. Nicaraguans show up more often among the trafficking victims in Guatemala than among the irregular migrants detected in the United States. But more Nicaraguans are deported from Guatemala than from any other country, suggesting that many Nicaraguans may be destined for intermediate countries rather than the United States. As all these countries are in the C-4 visa area (in which citizens of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua can travel freely between these four countries), promises of jobs in Guatemala may be used to lure Nicaraguan victims.

The situation in El Salvador is very different. El Salvador detects more human trafficking victims than any other country in the region, and between 2005 and 2010, 79% of these victims were from El Salvador. Based on data from victim shelters, less than three-quarters (73%) of the vic-

Figure 46: Breakdown of national origin of trafficking victims detected in Guatemala, 2005-2010

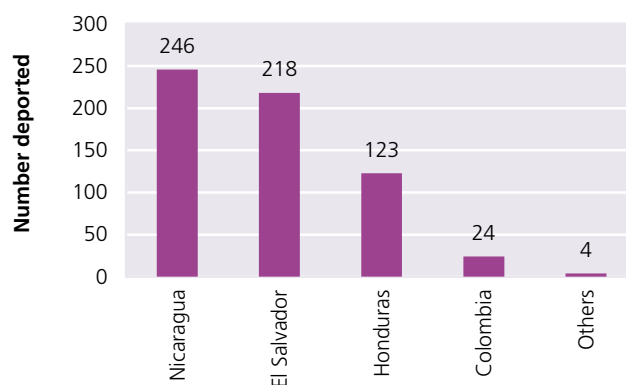


Source: Policía Nacional Civil, Guatemala

63 See: <http://www.casa-alianzamexico.org/quienes.html>

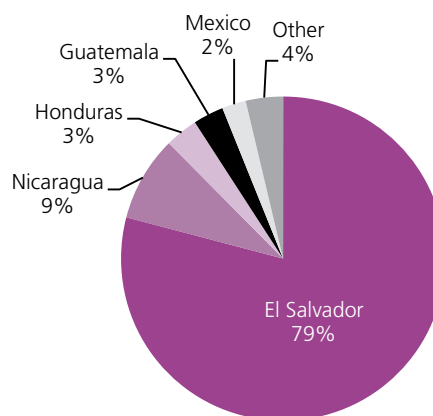
64 ECPAT International is a global network of organisations and individuals working together for the elimination of child prostitution, child pornography and the trafficking of children for sexual purposes.

Figure 47: National origin of deportees from Guatemala 2009-2010



Source: Policía Nacional Civil, Guatemala

Figure 48: Breakdown of national origin of trafficking victims detected in El Salvador, 2005-2010



Source: Policía Nacional Civil, El Salvador

Asian labour trafficking detected in Costa Rica

The trafficking of men and boys into forced labour on fishing boats is a major issue in Southeast Asia, and the problem is beginning to be detected outside Asia. Trafficked fishermen may be forced to work long hours with little or no pay, and simply tossed overboard when they are of no further use. In 2010, 36 Asians (including 15 Vietnamese, 13 Indonesians, five Filipinos, two Taiwanese, and one Chinese citizen) were rescued from fishing boats off Puntarenas. The Taiwanese owners and captains of the two fishing boats were arrested on charges of human trafficking. The victims were forced to work up to 20 hours a day, never receiving the promised wages of US\$250/month.¹ This is not the first time exploited Vietnamese fishermen were detected: in 2009, nine were found. Chinese victims have also been detected inland, indentured in laundries and other Chinese-run businesses.

1 Zueras, D. 'Costa Rica : (In)human trafficking'. *Interpress Service*, 15 April 2010

tims are sexually exploited, indicating that other forms of trafficking exist. Similarly, in Nicaragua in recent years, over 80% of the victims have been Nicaraguan. Trafficking in these countries is four-fifths domestic.

Further south, the situation changes again. In Panama, women from Colombia and Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Romania, Moldova, and the Russian Federation) comprised the bulk of the victims detected in 2011, though these high profile cases are not necessarily representative of the overall victim pool. This is reflective of a wealthy local clientele (able to pay for the luxury of imported women) and a strong tourist trade.

How is the trafficking conducted?

The markets in Guatemala and Mexico seem to be a direct by-product of migrant smuggling. Women and girls headed north find themselves compromised and exploited. Some wind up in exploitative labour – recent studies suggest that labour trafficking may have recently eclipsed sexual exploitation in Mexico.⁶⁵ Some are trafficked into begging, especially indigenous girls. Others are subjected to sexual exploitation.

For exploitation in Chiapas, most of the victims are recruited close to the border, in towns like Malacatán, Tecún Umán, and El Carmen. They may be approached by unknown people (referred to as “*enganchadores*” or “*reclutadores*,” “*padrotes*”, or “*caifanes*”), often in a public place, such as parks. Victims have been identified in over a dozen cities in Chiapas, but Tuxtla Gutiérrez and Tapachula seem to be particularly prominent.⁶⁶

In some cases, the victims may be kidnapped, or forced into prostitution by people who were their smugglers. In others, they may be robbed or have simply run out of money. With no other means of support, they may be lured into the sex trade. Some may have dependents to support back home, and when they learn that they have no other means of sending remittances, find themselves involved in sex work, an activity they would never contemplate in their own countries. Traffickers know where migrant women congregate, and use their experience to spot potential victims.

Once involved, many women find it difficult to get out. Brothel owners may threaten them with violence or exposure if they perceive that a worker is about to leave. Particularly if the trafficker was originally employed as a smuggler, they may have knowledge of the victim’s hometown and relations.

The Dominican Republic – the only global source of victims in the region

For reasons that require more research, the Dominican Republic is the only country in the region that consistently supplies victims to countries considerably farther away. Dominican women have been trafficked for sexual exploitation to Guatemala, El Salvador, Panama, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, and the United States, as well as regions farther afield, including Europe, South America, and the Middle East.

Map 10: Trafficking flows of women and girls in Central America, 2011



Source: UNODC

⁶⁵ Le Goff, H., and T. Weiss, *La trata de personas en México: Diagnostico sobre la asistencia a victimas*. International Organization on Migration, June 2011.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

In short, trafficking in Chiapas and Guatemala appears to be opportunistic. The large flow of irregular migrants practically guarantees that some women and girls will get left behind, stranded in a foreign land without resources or options. Traffickers can make money by exploiting this vulnerability. So long as brothels operate openly in these areas, and no other alternatives are forthcoming for these women and girls, the exploitation will continue.

There have been accounts of women being lured by fictitious employment opportunities, but traffickers in this area do not need to be so clever. Their victims will continue to cross borders, at their own expense, in search of non-fictitious employment opportunities further north. All traffickers need to do is be alert, wait for a few to stumble, befriend them, and take advantage of their disorientation.

To remain competitive in such a saturated market, traffickers need to operate fairly openly. Brothels and bars in red light districts are likely to receive more business than more underground establishments. In Guatemala, while offering sexual services is legal, procuring these services is not. Nonetheless, there are many well-known services and establishments that advertise and operate without pretense to legitimacy.

The number of detected trafficking victims in Guatemala has declined remarkably in recent years. In addition, Guatemalan women and girls comprise a growing share of the victim pool. Fewer Salvadorans and Hondurans are found. This may be due, in part, to declining migrant flows. It may also be attributable to growing migrant awareness of the risks of being trafficked. Among the Guatemalan women and girls trafficked, mestizo victims are more likely to be sexually exploited, while indigenous victims are more likely to be trafficked into begging or domestic servitude.⁶⁷

In Costa Rica and Panama, trafficking follows a more traditional model. Women are imported from Eastern Europe and South America to serve high-end local demand, the sizable expatriate community, and sex tourists, particularly from the United States. Some of these women are deprived of their liberty and otherwise exploited.

For example, in March 2011, after obtaining registration to operate as an entertainment company, a nightclub called The Diamond requested approval of a visa for 10 women of foreign nationality who were recruited as “entertainers”. Suspicions that this was an illegal operation arose as eight of the ten women tried to escape from the establishment. The supposed artists had remained locked in an apartment and worked six days a week, receiving a basic monthly salary of US\$350. To make the trip to Panama, visas were processed from the Consulate of Panama in Russia. The approval of visas was authorized by the then Deputy

Director of Migration, who was fired the same day the story hit the press.⁶⁸

The Panamanian “*alternadora*” visa was specifically designed for females working in the adult entertainment industry, but was eliminated in 2009. Many women still travel to these countries with the intention of engaging in sex work, but cases like The Diamond show that some fall prey to exploitation. Unfortunately, these high-profile cases may mask domestic trafficking, including trafficking of children, that occurs in more remote locations, including the Darien strip.

Who are the traffickers?

For victimization in Chiapas, the *enganchadores* or *reclutadores* may be Guatemalan or Mexican, but the former appear to be more common. In one study, 62% of the traffickers were women, and 50% were Guatemalan.⁶⁹ Some of these Guatemalan traffickers may also traffic women in Guatemala as well.

Polleros (migrant smugglers) are particularly well placed to route women into exploitation. A number of factors could influence whether the *pollero* performs the service for which they were employed or betrays their clients. Decline in migrant flows could conceivably compel *polleros* to turn to trafficking to keep up their income. They may also be compelled to provide victims to border area territorial groups as a condition of their continued operation.

Bar and brothel owners in Chiapas and Guatemala are surely complicit in the trade. Since most of the women transport themselves across the border, there is really no need for dedicated procurers, although scouts may be used to befriend potential victims and steer them toward the exploitation site.

Alongside these systemic actors, professional human traffickers may operate as well, of course. One example is the 2011 “Torres Cuello” case in El Salvador. One man and two women were convicted of luring girls aged 14 to 16 years from the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua to El Salvador, where their sexual services were advertised on the Internet for prices ranging from US\$60 to US\$150. There was evidence this network operated in other countries as well.

Because the exploitation in Mexico is especially concentrated along the border area, it is not surprising that territorial organized crime groups have become involved. The Zetas in particular have been implicated. These links came to light in the case of Jesús Ovidio Guardado, a Salvadoran *pollero* who sold victims to the Zetas. Aside from sexual exploitation, the Zetas may drive victims into drug trafficking, or hold them for ransom. When the Honduran

67 Interview with ECPAT Guatemala, 30 April 2012.

68 Interview with Raúl Olmos, former magistrate of the Republic of Panama.

69 Le Goff, H., and T. Weiss, *La trata de personas en México: Diagnóstico sobre la asistencia a víctimas*. International Organization on Migration, June 2011.

consul in Chiapas spoke out about Zetas involvement in trafficking, she received death threats, and was later removed from her office by the Foreign Ministry for her own protection.

In Costa Rica and Panama, it appears that many of the high-end clubs are owned by United States citizens, although there are many locally-owned establishments as well.

How big is the flow?

The number of trafficked sex workers in any country is a matter of speculation, and estimates are usually based on the number of victims detected. The rate most often used internationally is that one in 30 women trafficked into sex work will be detected annually. In Chiapas in 2010, there were 79 cases of trafficking in persons,⁷⁰ and there are indications that just over a quarter of the victims are from Central America.⁷¹ This would suggest around 20 detected victims, which, with a one in 30 detection rate, would be 600 victims. Recent studies suggest, however, that only a minority of these would be trafficked into sexual exploitation, or about 200 victims.⁷²

In Guatemala, 53 victims were detected in 2010, implying around 1,600 victims. This is quite a bit less than the numbers cited by groups like Casa Alianza (15,000 child victims in Guatemala City alone), but the Casa Alianza estimate may refer to all underage sex workers. In Panama, 33 victims were detected in 2011, implying just under 1,000 victims. In Costa Rica in 2010, the figures were atypical due to the detection of trafficked fishermen. Removing these cases leaves 13 victims, suggesting around 400 victims overall. In sum, the market in Chiapas/Guatemala and Costa Rica/Panama would tally at about 3,000 victims. Most studies suggest a turnover of about two years, which would imply an influx of around 1500 victims per year.

In terms of the income generated by these victims, prices per work hour vary widely depending on the venue and the service. A study that focused on high-end night clubs and massage parlours in San Jose, Costa Rica found that while sex in a night club could cost as much as US\$100 to US\$300, the average price for sex in a massage parlour was US\$15 per hour. In low-end clubs, the price cited was US\$9 per hour. The study also emphasized that women in nightclubs provide a number of other services to clients for lesser fees.⁷³

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.⁷⁴ If all the trafficked sex workers were equally exploited, they would provide a total of almost 2.5 million illegal sexual services per year. Using the high-end massage parlour rate of US\$15 per hour for each of these services, this would amount to a market size of about US\$36.5 million per year.

Implications for responses

The situation in Guatemala and Chiapas is symptomatic of the larger migration problem. If exploitable women were not present in such abundance, the bloated market would soon return to more standard proportions. Any intervention that would reduce the number of displaced women, or assure that they have alternatives to sex work if they find themselves at loose ends, would reduce the opportunities for traffickers.

The situation in the south is more straightforward. A large and open sex industry provides cover for exploitative practices. Measures must be taken to increase industry vigilance.

70 Procuraduría General del Estado de Chiapas:
<http://www.pgje.chiapas.gob.mx/numerospgje/Default.aspx>

71 <http://www.provincia.com.mx/2012/04/detalla-chiapas-a-la-onu-resultados-del-combate-a-trata-de-personas/>

72 IOM found that a majority of the victims detected in Chiapas were trafficked for agricultural labour. See IOM 2011 op cit.

73 Mong-Najera, J. and K. Vega Corrales, 'The price of sexual services in nightclubs and massage parlours of San Jose, Costa Rica: biological and anthropological interpretations'. Laboratorio de Ecología Urbana, Vicerrectoria de Investigación, Universidad Estatal a Distancia. August 2011.

74 Mack, N., T. Grey, A. Amsterdam, C. Interiano Matta, and N. Williamson, 'Central American sex workers' introduction of the female condom to different types of sexual partners'. *AIDS Education and Prevention*, Vol 22, No 5, 2010, pp 466–481.