With tens of thousands of people migrating irregularly, it is not surprising that some of this migration leads to exploitation. 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. 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. 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.

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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. 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.

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 victims were from El Salvador. Based on data from victim shelters, less than three-quarters (73%) of the victims were from El Salvador.
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, Técún 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.


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”. Susticians 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 from the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua to El Salvador, women were convicted of luring girls aged 14 to 16 years 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. They are tricks. 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.

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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.
Trafficking of women and girls within Central America

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.

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71 http://www.provincia.com.mx/2012/04/detalla-chiapas-a-la-onu-resultados-del-combate-a-trafa-de-personas/
72 IOM found that a majority of the victims detected in Chiapas were trafficked for agricultural labour. See IOM 2011 op cit.