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| Human Trafficking: The Prevalence in Latin America  Written by: Britney Molloy |

Human Trafficking: The Prevalence in Latin America

*“They offered a great job…a fantasy salary…700 pesos… …three meals a day…”*

These were the words of an anonymous woman during her interview with Mexico’s President, Felipe Calderon (Ramos 2011). During this interview, she shares about being offered a dream job as an aid in a different city (Ramos 2011). She was promised food, salary, transportation, and dignified work (Ramos 2011). However, as this unsuspecting woman would soon find, none of these promises would ever come true (Ramos 2011). Instead of dignified work, this woman was kidnapped, and forced into prostitution (Ramos 2011). Her dreams, her freedom, her life, and her worth were all stolen from her (Ramos 2011). This is one woman’s story about her life as a victim of human trafficking.

Human trafficking is the trading of a man, woman, or child for the use of forced labor, sexual exploitation, or other forms of oppression and exploitation. This is a phenomenon that is growing worldwide. According the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report of 2010, there are approximately 800,000 individuals, mostly women and children, who are trafficked internationally each year (CIA, 2011). The TIP Report also reveals that, “75% of all victims are trafficked into commercial sexual exploitation” (CIA, 2011). Most would agree that human trafficking is a form of modern day slavery. According to the International Labor Organization, there is an estimated 12.3 million people who are currently enslaved worldwide (CIA, 2011). Slavery, especially in today’s society, should not be tolerated. So why, then, is there such a demand for the trafficking of humans? More specifically, what fuels this demand in countries like Latin America?

This paper will explore the causes of human trafficking in Latin America, tacticsused by traffickers, and the impact that trafficking has on the United States. Finally, the research will demonstrate that the crime of human trafficking has not been properly addressed by governments in Latin America, as well as in the international community as a whole. There must be more efforts made to criminalize human trafficking. In sum, this paper will provide the readers with a diverse range of knowledge on human trafficking in Latin America.

This topic is of importance because it shines light on a prevalent, yet dark, issue. By examining the effects that human trafficking has on the political, economic, and social systems of Latin America, one will be able to better understand the important role both governments and citizens play in combating this problem. Further, as people learn more about this subject, they will also better understand the life of victims. As earlier demonstrated by the woman’s account, victims’ lives are taken away; they are robbed of their dreams and worth. By learning more about human trafficking and its victims, efforts can be made to reintroduce an overtone of worth into every victim’s life.

**Literature Review**

In the study “International Trafficking in Women to the United States: A Contemporary Manifestation of Slavery and Organized Crime,” Amy O’Niell Richard, who is an analyst with the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, examines the trends of human trafficking within the United States (Richard 1999). Richard begins by discussing the origins of human trafficking and potential causes for influxes of victims being transported to the United States. She explains that,

“trafficking in the U.S. is likely to increase given weak economies and few job opportunities in the countries of origin; low risk of prosecution and enormous profit potential for the traffickers; and improved international transportation infrastructures” (Richard 1999, iii).

Given the economic instability of many Latin American countries, one can understand why Richard specifically includes Latin America throughout her study (Richard 1999). She discusses Latin American traffickers, their entry into the US, the tactics used by Latin American traffickers to coerce victims into slavery, and the role that organized crime plays in trafficking rings in Latin America (Richard 1999). This study was done through conducting thorough research and examining case studies in order to provide information about trafficking in the United States (Richard 1999).

**Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP)**

The TIP Report of 2010 provides information on the scope of human trafficking worldwide. This report “assesses the government response in 150 countries with a significant number of victims trafficked across their borders” (CIA, 2011). The report is divided into segments that reveal the status of each country’s response. The segments are as follows:

* “**TIER 1:** Countries whose governments fully comply with the Trafficking Victims Protection Act’s (TVPA) minimum standards
* **TIER 2**: Countries whose governments do not fully comply with the TVPA’s minimum standards, but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards.
* **TIER 2 WATCH LIST:** Countries whose governments do not fully comply with the TVPA’s minimum standards, but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards, AND: a) the absolute number of victims of severe forms of trafficking is very significant or is significantly increasing; b) there is a failure to provide evidence of increasing efforts to combat severe forms of trafficking in persons from the previous year; or, c) the determination that a country is making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with minimum standards was based on commitments by the country to take additional future steps over the next year
* **TIER 3**: Countries whose governments do not fully comply with the minimum standards and are not making significant efforts to do so” (U.S. Department of State, 2011).

Through examining this report, one will find that most countries in Latin America (with the exception of Colombia, according to TIP Report 2010), are not yet in full compliance with the TVPA’s minimum standards. Fortunately, a majority of these countries are on the Tier 2 Watch List, which means that overall; Latin America is making significant efforts to fulfill the TVPA’s minimum standards.

**“Trafficking in Persons in Latin America and the Caribbean”**

This article, written by specialist in Latin American Affairs Clare Ribando Seelke, examines the growing problem of human trafficking in Latin America. Seelke discusses many factors that contribute to human trafficking both through forced labor and sexual exploitation in Latin America. The article also discusses the United States’ Anti-Trafficking Policies along with its involvement in Latin America. Latin America, according to Seelke is, “a region that contains major source, transit and destination countries for trafficking victims” (Seelke 2010, 1). This article reveals that there are nine countries in the studied regions that are on the Tier 2 Watch List; which, as aforementioned, means they are in danger of receiving a Tier 3 Ranking in future Reports. This indicates that there are still many countries in Latin America who do not view Human Trafficking as a pressing issue that needs addressed.

**“Canada Needs to Act Against Sex Tourists”**

In a news article Brian Seaman, a researcher from the Alberta Civil Liberty Research Institute, hypothesizes that human trafficking in Latin America is partially fueled by the demand that comes from “sex tourists,” who tend to be wealthy men from North America and Europe (Seaman and Tomasi, 2011). Seaman and Tomasi provide data from the United Nations’ International Organization for Migration (IOM), which reveals that, “…roughly 6,000 unaccompanied children and teens cross over between Brazil and Paraguay each year” (Seaman and Tomasi, 2011). It is likely that these young people are crossing the Brazil and Paraguay border in hopes to find better economic opportunities. However, these young individuals face high risks of being forced into the sex trade (Seaman and Tomasi 2011).

This article provides two central theories as to why human trafficking is prevalent in Latin America, specifically Brazil and Argentina:

1. The boarder of Brazil and Argentina is where Iguazu Falls is located; this is not only a popular attraction for tourists, but also sex tourists. The demand for sex workers (who often are trafficked victims) is fueled by sex tourists, who tend to be wealthy European or North American men.
2. While the act of trafficking may be illegal in many places, there may not be enough resources to address the problems. There is a lack of investigatory and prosecutorial resources that are devoted to rescuing victims.

There seems to be a common trend that occurs while investigating the cause for human trafficking in Latin America, whether domestically (such as in the Iguazu Case Study) or internationally (as learned through examining the relationship between the U.S. and Latin America). This occurs because, as the demand for sex workers increases, the supply must also. Perhaps the only way in which this atrocity will end is through a global effort to end trafficking. There must be an entity that, after pinpointing the demand, will do everything in its power to cease the demand. This means domestic-prosecution for those who engage in sex-tourism. As Seaman and Tomasi imply, domestic litigation is the only way in which sex-tourism will be solved. For, as we have learned, within the poorer countries, such as Brazil and Argentina, there are not enough resources to prosecute abusers.

**The Prevalence and Causes of Human Trafficking in Latin America**

This section will examine the causes of human trafficking in Latin America. According the International Labor Organization, there are about 250,000 trafficking victims in Latin America and the Caribbean regions (Un.Gift 2011). Further, there are approximately 15,000 Latin Americans who are trafficked into the United States each year (Goolsby 2003). By examining the causes of human trafficking in Latin America, one can better understand why it is so prevalent. Also, these concepts can be applied broadly and across the globe. This allows the reader to understand why human trafficking is so widespread in today’s world.

As mentioned earlier, weak economies serve as a prominent feature in human trafficking rings. In many areas in Latin America, jobs and money are scarce. So, people may turn to desperate measures in order to earn a living. According to a study pertaining to citizens’ views on the economy, “seven out of ten Latin Americans rate themselves [as] concerned (or very concerned) with losing their jobs” (Lora and Marquez 1998, 3). Further, the economic opportunities for women in Latin America are very limited (Seelke 2010, 5). This may mean, as Seelke writes, that people, motivated by “the hope of finding economic opportunity abroad” in Latin America are more likely to accept risky job offers in other countries (Seelke 2010, 5). These people are prime targets for traffickers.

In some cases throughout Latin America, those responsible for trafficking victims are also mothers and fathers. In these instances, the prime targets for traffickers include their very own children. Studies show that many victimized children “…engage in commercial sex activity in order to contribute to household income” (Seelke 2010, 5). This indicates that, due to the harsh economic conditions in Latin America, families are willing sell their children into slavery. This theory is further proven when viewing the results from a survey on child prostitution in El Salvador. According to this study, 57% of the interviewed child sex slaves claimed to still be living with their parents or other close relatives (Seelke 2010, 5).

The very fact that there is a strong enough demand for children to be forced into slavery by their own families indicates that either more must be done in order to protect children, or that there should be more focus on economic development so families do not have to resort to these measures. This should begin by heavily prosecuting those who are fueling the demand for these children. As shown through these examples, the causes of human trafficking are oftentimes closely related to the economic conditions in Latin America.

Although disturbing to hear, the trafficking industry in Latin America is one that generates profit. For example, in less than five years, one family involved in the trafficking ring in Mexico made a profit of $8 million (Richard 2000, 20). These profits were made through the use of forced labor (Richard 2000, 20). In another trafficking incident in Mexico, “…traffickers made…$2.5 million over two years by forcing Mexican women and children into prostitution” (Richard 2000, 20). This study continues to reveal that, “the traffickers charged $22 for 15 minutes of sexual activity with women” (Richard 2000, 20).

These two case studies reveal a disturbing reality – that the trafficking industry in Latin America generates large profits. Cumulatively, Latin American countries generate an estimated $16 billion in the human trafficking business annually (Seelke 2010, 4). As discussed earlier, this profit is a result of a continuous demand for victims. Recall that this concept of supply and demand was also demonstrated in the case study of the tourist attraction Iguazu Falls (Seaman and Tomasi 2011). Because of the profits generated from human trafficking in Latin America, traffickers are likely to continue in their practice. In sum, the instabilities within Latin America’s economy and the need for job security both are agents that play into human trafficking in Latin America.

Additional causes for the prevalence of human trafficking in Latin America include the lack of resources allocated to addressing the issue. To begin, many regions in Latin America do not adequately penalize traffickers. This trend is demonstrated through examining the punishments that traffickers receive. In a trafficking ring in Mexico, some traffickers received only 1 – 8 years jail time, even though the victims in their ring suffered much abuse (Richard 2000, 34). Considering the torture that the 70 victims had gone through, this punishment does not seem just (Richard 2000, 34). Richard explains that trafficking penalties appear light because they do not “…reflect the multitude human rights abuses perpetrated against the women” (Richard 2000, 34). This is partially because trafficking as a crime is not clearly defined through legislation (Lanberg 2005, 133).

Next, as demonstrated in a review about trafficking in Latin America and the Caribbean, there are few resources available for victims (Langberg 2005, 132). For example, many Latin American countries have very few shelters for victims (Seelke 2010, 13). This means that victims who have been trafficked to and from Latin America have no place to go once they have been freed. Also, there are no rehabilitation or follow-up programs for victims after they have returned to their residencies (Seelke 2010, 13). For this reason, there is inadequate health, legal, and economic assistance extended to freed victims (Langberg 2005, 135). Because of these limited resources, victims may easily be coerced back into trafficking rings.

Even if resources were readily available to victims in Latin America, they may be of little use. This is because victims oftentimes do not speak against their recruiters. Victims are often reluctant to speak against their recruiters because of “institutional disincentives” (Langberg 2005, 132). Among these disincentives are policies that criminalize victims instead of protecting them (Langberg 2005, 132). This happens in Latin America because trafficking is associated with prostitution and not slavery (Langberg 2005, 133). As a result, victims of human trafficking face the same penalties as those who have been accused of prostitution.

Finally, many Latin American countries simply do not have the means to enforce anti-trafficking laws. This could be the result of limited funds or even political apathy towards trafficking. As explained by Seelke, many governmental systems in Latin America are not concerned with trafficking because of the prevalence of other regional crimes (Seelke 2010, 13). Crimes that are placed higher on the political agenda include gang violence and drug trafficking (Seelke 2010, 13). Governmental agencies view these crimes as more pressing than human trafficking. As a result, these agencies exhaust many of their resources to fight gang and drug related crimes. For this reason, traffickers may go unprosecuted. This means that the prevalence of human trafficking in Latin America will continue to grow.

**Tactics used to Target Victims**

There are many tactics that Latin American traffickers use to coerce victims into slavery. These tactics are also demonstrated by traffickers across the globe. The first that will be examined is the use of deceit. After reviewing articles on human trafficking, one will learn that traffickers can be very enticing; they come with promises of more pay and better job opportunities. Langberg compares such traffickers to businessmen, savvy and well-aware of the legalities of their work (Langberg 2005, 134). Langberg then notes that traffickers “frequently operate through legal means for illegal purposes” (Langberg 2005, 134). What Langberg means is that traffickers will work within the existing system in order to recruit and transport victims. Through doing so, they do not blatantly violate any laws.

Alongside deceit, manipulation and identity control are also common tactics used by traffickers (Richard 2000, 25). Often, traffickers are able to manipulate victims to comply by threatening to confiscate the victim’s identity papers (Richard 2000, 25). This is especially effective once a victim has been transported across international borders. Richard explains that victims are frequently trafficked into other countries, and are unaware of the abusive conditions of their accepted jobs (Richard 2000, 25). Once this happens and victims are in a new country, they may find that their traffickers have changed the terms of accepted income, travel fees, and costs of basic necessities (Richard 2000, 25). As a result, victims become more dependent on their traffickers, and find that hopes of escape are not very likely.

Traffickers will also use other available avenues in order to lure in victims. Newspapers, radios, and the internet are used to recruit victims through advertising false jobs (Langberg 2005, 134). Lawyers may prepare false documents (such as citizenship and marriage papers) for traffickers (Langberg 2005, 134). As mentioned earlier, these documents can later be used to manipulate victims. Further, identity papers may be used to attract new victims. The final, and quite possibly the most disturbing, avenue that traffickers have comes with impunity (Langberg 2005, 134). Traffickers oftentimes work alongside public officials, including police and immigration officers (Langberg 2005, 134). These public officials are well aware of trafficking rings. However, because of bribes and other forms of corruption, public officials may do nothing to end trafficking or penalize traffickers. For this reason, traffickers are immune from any consequences that they may encounter.

**Latin America’s Relationship with the United States and the Transporting of Victims**

The most commonway that traffickers transport victims into the United States is through the use of existing infrastructure. As Langberg describes, traffickers have elaborate networks that are used throughout the transportation process (Langberg, 2005, 134). Included in these networks are “private and public agents including shippers, taxi drivers, cyclists (rickshaws), and truckers” (Langberg 2005, 134). All of these agents utilize the existing infrastructure in order to transport victims. This is yet another example of how traffickers use “…legal means for illegal purposes” (Langberg 2005, 134). By working within the system, traffickers are less likely to be caught and penalized. While reading about how traffickers transport victims, one may draw the conclusion that trafficking is no different than smuggling operations. There is truth to this - Latin American traffickers function in a similar fashion as alien smuggling operations (Richard 2000, 17). This includes using similar routs and tactics as those involved in smuggling operations (Richard 2000, 17). For example, one tactic that is used by both smugglers and traffickers is bribing public officials.

Although these two types of organized crime operate in similar fashions, it is important to note the difference between the two groups. As distinguished by Seelke, “alien smuggling involves the provision of a service…to people who knowingly consent to that service in order to gain illegal entry…” (Seelke 2010, 2). This means that there is a consensus between both parties involved in smuggling operations. On the other hand, human trafficking rings use “force, fraud, or coercion” during operations (Seelke 2010, 2). These three factors show that there is no honest consensus between victims and traffickers. According to the Department of Justice, “this is what distinguishes trafficking from human smuggling” (Seelke 2010, 2).

There are many methods that Latin American traffickers use in order to ensure their victims stay within the United States once they have been transported. One includes keeping close control of clientele (Richard 2000, 17). This is oftentimes done through clientele-racial profiling. This means that only those of the Latino race may be allowed access to victims(Richard 2000, 17). As Richard explains, many Mexican or Latin American owned brothels will only allow other Latinos to enter (Richard 2000, 17). This may be done because underground brothel owners assume that other Latino clients may be in the country illegally. This helps ensure that the clientele will not disclose the information about the underground brothels to officials in the United States.

Another method that traffickers use is continually relocating their victims. Richard explains that, in one trafficking case that involved Mexicans, “women and girls were rotated every 15 days among some 11 cities in Florida and 2 in South Carolina” (Richard 2000, 12). This is done for a number of reasons. First, relocating victims provides a rotation of workers within brothels (Richard 2000, 11). Through rotating victims “fresh faces” for the clientele is provided (Richard 2000, 11). For traffickers, there are additional benefits to relocating victims. This can also keep victims disoriented, therefore preventing them from being able to contact law enforcement (Richard 2000, 11). Another reason that traffickers will relocate their victims is to ensure that relationships between workers and clients do not form (Richard 2000, 12). This is important to traffickers because, if relationships form, then clients may try to assist victims in their escape (Richard 2000, 12).

**Conclusions**

Through examining the growing industry of human trafficking in Latin America, one can clearly see that there must be more efforts made to combat this atrocity. The economic instabilityof many Latin American countries provides the foundation for human trafficking rings to flourish. Through lax laws and loose litigation, countries do not appropriately punish traffickers. Instead, public officials accept bribes and participate in trafficking rings. Currently, there is nothing in place to help taper the supply and demand for trafficked victims in Latin America. There must be global efforts made in order to fully combat modern day slavery. It seems as if global leaders take a child-like approach to this issue and pretend that, if they cannot see the monster, it does not exist. However, as discussed throughout this paper, slavery still exists, and something more must be done to end it.

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