



GENDER IMBALANCE IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING

“The root causes of migration and trafficking greatly overlap. The lack of rights afforded to women serves as the primary causative factor at the root of both women’s migrations and trafficking in women...By failure to protect and promote women’s civil, political, economic and social rights, governments create situations in which trafficking flourishes.”

—Radhika Coomaraswamy, UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women

According to the ILO, the majority of people trafficked for sexual exploitation or subjected to forced labor are female. According to researchers, both the supply and demand sides of the trade in human beings are fed by “gendered” vulnerabilities to trafficking. These vulnerabilities are the result of political, economic, and development processes that may leave some women socially and economically dependent on men. If that support from men becomes limited or withdrawn, women become dangerously susceptible to abuse. They often have no individual protection or recognition under the law, inadequate access to healthcare and education, poor employment prospects, little opportunity to own property, or high levels of social isolation. All this makes some women easy targets for harassment, violence, and human trafficking.

Research links the disproportionate demand for female trafficking victims to the growth of certain “feminized” economic sectors (commercial sex, the “bride trade,” domestic service) and other sectors characterized by low wages, hazardous conditions, and an absence of collective bargaining mechanisms. Exploitative employers prefer to use

trafficked women—traditionally seen as submissive, cheap, and pliable—for simple and repetitive tasks in agriculture, food processing, labor-intensive manufacturing, and domestic servitude.

In countries where women’s economic status has improved, significantly fewer local women participate in commercial sex. Traffickers bring in more female victims to address the demand and also take advantage of women who migrate voluntarily to work in any industry. As commercial sex is illegal in most countries, traffickers use the resulting illegal status of migrant women that have been trafficked into commercial sex to threaten or coerce them against leaving.

Gendered vulnerabilities fostered by social and institutional weaknesses in some societies—discriminatory laws and practices that tie a woman’s legal recognition, property rights, and economic opportunities to someone else—make women more likely than men to become trafficking victims. A woman who exists only through a male guardian who controls her income, identification, citizenship, and physical well-being is more susceptible to becoming a trafficking victim.

In many cultures, new widows must adhere to strict mourning practices, such as a month of isolation, or become outcasts. Despite official inheritance laws, during her isolation the relatives of a deceased man may confiscate the man’s property from his widow and children. In many cases, without her husband’s permission the destitute widow may not withdraw money from her bank account, register her husband’s death or their child’s birth, receive a passport, or take a job. Without a birth certificate, she cannot enroll her child in public school or see the doctor at the local clinic. Desperate to feed her child, the widow becomes easy prey for human traffickers.



A 40-year-old man sits with his 11-year-old child bride in Afghanistan. In March 2009, Afghanistan passed a controversial Shia family law that condones child marriage, which has been documented as a significant contributing factor to sex trafficking in Afghanistan.

For more information, please log on to the Web site of the State Department’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons at www.state.gov/g/tip.