



THE FEMINIZATION OF MODERN SLAVERY

In the years since the United Nations' Palermo Protocol established standards for the modern anti-trafficking effort, disturbing trends are coming into focus – such as the feminization of migration. Given the increase in women migrating for work, and the unscrupulous nature of labor recruiting, we have seen the feminization of labor trafficking, which was once thought of as the male counterpoint to sex trafficking of women. But like their brothers, husbands, and sons, women are trapped in fields, factories, mines, and restaurants, often suffering the dual demons of forced labor and sexual assault. As we more fully understand the plight of women who are victims of labor trafficking, we continue to see the devastating effects of sex trafficking, where services for survivors are as rare as programs that address the demand for their victimization. And if they are found, women are repatriated as a matter of first instance, or are locked in “shelters” that look more like prisons than the safe haven that survivors need.

“The current share of women in the world’s population of international migrants is close to half, and available evidence suggests that migrant flows and their impacts are strongly gendered,” noted the World Bank in a report on the International Migration of Women. The numbers of migrants around the world have increased from 120 million in 2005 to over 213 million, and at least 49 percent of this population is female.

According to “The Cost of Coercion,” a report by the International Labour Organization (ILO), women comprise at least 56 percent of the world’s victims of modern slavery. They are exploited in fields and brothels, in homes and conflicts, and in factories and fisheries. More women are being pushed out of developing countries due to economic, familial, and societal pressures – becoming ever more vulnerable to modern slavery.

This feminization of migration is seen in Indonesia, where millions of girls and women now leave to find work abroad, including as domestic servants in more developed countries in East Asia and the Middle East. Just five years ago, the majority of Indonesia’s six to nine million migrants were men; now more than 70 percent are women and girls. They often

end up in places void of worker protections. Some feel compelled to make the journey more than once to try earning the money they were initially promised even if they have suffered abuse or their job failed to meet expectations. New routes of feminized migration have appeared in recent years – from Madagascar to Lebanon, from Ethiopia to the Persian Gulf states, and from Southeast Asia to the Middle East.

“More and more people including young women are on the move, at a time when changing patterns of production and consumption are in turn affecting demand for labour. ... A particular problem throughout the world has been the manipulation of financial credit, locking poor people into severe indebtedness and in the worst cases a debt bondage that can be equated legally with modern slavery.”

Roger Plant, former head of the ILO's Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labor



AP Photo/Ginnette Riquelme

Many migrant domestic workers around the world, including some employed by diplomats, are particularly vulnerable to forced labor. Overwhelmingly female and typically from developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, they assume great risks when migrating abroad. A recent ILO report noted that the origins of domestic work trace back to a “master-servant” relationship rooted in slavery and other forms of servitude. Despite such linkages, many countries, including the United States, do not offer protection to domestic workers under prevailing labor laws, casting their work as something other than regular employment. This lack of legal protection – combined with the social isolation and a lack of personal autonomy inherent in live-in domestic service – provides an enabling environment for involuntary servitude.

“[W]omen concentrate in temporary, casual, and flexible labor primarily due to their subordinate social and economic status, [and they] are hired as cheap, compliant labor that can be hired and fired more easily.”

*“A Pro-Poor Analysis of the Shrimp Sector in Bangladesh,”
United States Agency for International Development, 2006*

Women continue to be enslaved in commercial sex around the world. Entire communities are being emptied of their women; in Moldova, an estimated 400,000 women were sold into slavery between 1991 and 2008, notes international anti-trafficking expert E. Benjamin Skinner. These trafficked women are often arrested for participating in a crime that victimizes them. Instead, they should be provided with services and benefit from a well-trained police force that implements proven and compassionate victim identification measures. Recent prosecutions demonstrate the interplay between labor and sex trafficking, as women brought in as guest worker maids or waitresses have been forced into prostitution as well as sexually abused by their employers. Women continue to toil in sweatshop factories without food or break, sewing garments, peeling shrimp, and weaving carpets under threat of violence. Bonded by debt and force, they pick cotton, mine conflict minerals, and harvest rice alongside their children. Denied access to credit that could be invested at home or other economic opportunities, women are opting to



At a protest in Beirut, Lebanon, an Eritrean woman carries a banner in Arabic that reads: “On International Women’s Day, for the rights of foreign domestic workers.”

AP Photo/Grace Kassab

seek risky employment or are being pushed into the arms of unscrupulous labor brokers. Restrictive policies that seek to control the emigration of single women or women under a certain age likely feed further disempowerment, rather than help these women attain security.

Women are not just the victims. In so many countries, they are the solution, and policies that help women benefit everyone. For instance, many of the most effective shelters for trafficking victims, no matter their sex, build on the best practices of battered women’s shelters. In the United States, the victim-centered approach of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 was patterned on the lessons of legal reforms targeting domestic violence and sexual assault. Some governments lack policies and programs designed with victims’ needs in mind. When given a pathway for success, women serve as the designers of these policies and the leaders of their implementation alike.

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