



VULNERABILITY OF INDIGENOUS PERSONS TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING

The United Nations estimates there are more than 370 million indigenous people worldwide. At times, they are described as aboriginal: members of a tribe or members of a specific group. While there is no internationally accepted definition of “indigenous,” the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues identifies several key factors to facilitate international understanding of the term:

- Self-identification of indigenous peoples at an individual and community level;
- Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies;
- Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources;
- Distinct social, economic, or political systems;
- Distinct language, culture, and beliefs;
- Membership in non-dominant groups of society; and/or
- Resolve to maintain and reproduce ancestral environments and system as distinctive peoples and communities.



Worldwide, indigenous persons are often economically and politically marginalized and are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and armed conflict. They may lack citizenship and access to basic services, sometimes including education. These factors make indigenous peoples particularly vulnerable to both sex trafficking and forced labor. For example, children from hill tribes in northern Thailand seeking employment opportunities have been found in commercial sexual exploitation, including sex trafficking, in bars in major cities within the country. In North America, government officials and NGOs alike have identified aboriginal Canadian and American Indian women and girls as particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking. In Latin America, members of indigenous communities are often more vulnerable to both sex and labor trafficking than other segments of local society; in both Peru and Colombia, they have been forcibly recruited by illegal armed groups. In remote areas of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, members of Batwa, or pygmy groups, are subjected to conditions of forced labor in agriculture, mining, mechanics, and domestic service. San women and boys in Namibia are exploited in domestic servitude and forced cattle herding, while San girls are vulnerable to sex trafficking.

Combating the trafficking of indigenous persons requires prosecution, protection, and prevention efforts that are culturally-sensitive and collaborative—efforts that also empower indigenous groups to identify and respond to forced labor and sex trafficking within their communities. For example, the government of the Canadian province of British Columbia and NGOs have partnered with aboriginal communities to strengthen their collective capacity to effectively work with trafficking victims by incorporating community traditions and rituals into victim protection efforts, such as use of the medicine wheel—a diverse indigenous tradition with spiritual and healing purposes.