

Concept Paper

Socio-Economic Inequality, Human Trafficking, and the Global Slave Trade

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to discuss human trafficking within the broader framework of socio-economic inequality. The presence of socio-economic inequality in the world creates a system where those in power very easily dominate and take advantage of those people without power. One of the most serious contemporary effects of inequalities between and within nations is the phenomenon of global sex trade or human trafficking for the purposes of sex. Deriving from unequal power relations, human trafficking is a serious global crime that involves the exploitation of many, but mostly females and children. This paper provides an extensive discussion of inequality and its links with human trafficking as contemporary slavery. In conclusion, the paper provides a list of selected intra-national and multi-national service organizations that are adopting strategies for combating trafficking through the reduction of social and economic inequality. Implications for social welfare advocates and international collaborative efforts are highlighted.

Keywords: social inequality; globalization; slavery; human trafficking; poverty

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss human trafficking within the broader framework of inequality. Inequality and inequity between and among societies has always been part of human civilization. In the earliest of civilizations, the wealthy engaged in oppressive acts, such as the ownership of slaves, due to the powers that their wealth allotted them. As Sibley and Liu [1] stated,

social inequality stems from an ever-present set of beliefs created by the political elites in order to maintain their own power and control over the poor and powerless. Political elites and wealthy members of society initially crafted social inequality in order to maintain their own power and wealth, while simultaneously creating social structures that eliminated the possibility of upward mobility for lower classes. This view is corroborated by social dominance theorists who suggest that social inequality exists due to the set of beliefs developed and maintained by social hierarchical class [2]. In other words, the aspiration of the wealthy and powerful to maintain their control offers a simple and clear cause to the perpetual existence of social inequality.

As such, social inequality greatly impacts economic, social, and political domains and the relationships of those domains at the individual, local, and global levels. The effects of social inequality on an individual may lead to negative outcomes, such as violence, victimization, mental illness, substance abuse, homelessness, and disease [3]. Individuals who experience social inequality also tend to lack in social capital. Rivello and Weaver [4] found that there is a strong relationship between low social capital and high mortality rates. In neighborhoods and localities where social inequality presides, mortality rates rise due to the presence of violence. In the United States, Wright and Fagan [5] found a strong relationship between disadvantaged neighborhoods and youth violence and child abuse. They suggested that disadvantaged neighborhoods produce a cycle of violence. The cycle of violence may lead to substance abuse, mental illness, crime, school dropout, poor health outcomes, and higher mortality rates [5]. As social inequality increases on a global level, poverty and inequity also increase. For example, as Fosu [6] found in a sample of World Bank data from 1980 to 2004, increases in measurements of inequality by Gini coefficients corresponded to high rates of poverty. For example, Sub-Saharan Africa has, by headcount, a high concentration of persons living at the one-dollar-per-day level, 42.80. Similarly the measure of inequality, by Gini coefficient, in Sub-Saharan Africa is comparable, at 45.82 [6] (p. 1438). While average poverty levels are low (*i.e.*, mean headcount ratio, 10.81) in Latin America and the Caribbean, the upper end of the poverty level by headcount ratio (52.90) is consonant with high income inequality in the region (mean Gini coefficient, 51.84) [6] (p. 1438).

Thus, Fosu [6] concluded, “the evidence involves the tendency of rising inequality to increase poverty.” Globally, these inequities result in the increasing socio-economic gap between developing and industrialized nations in this era of globalization. The increased global disparity can be found throughout economic, social, and political domains; it manifests as inadequate healthcare, poor standards of living, and the maintenance of a stratified class system [7]. Apart from poverty, perhaps one of the most serious contemporary effects of inequalities between and within nations is the phenomena of global sex trade or human trafficking for the purposes of sex [8]. From this formative linkage between inequality and human trafficking, the current paper provides an extensive discussion of inequality and concludes with ways of combating trafficking through the reduction of social and economic inequality.

2. Understanding Social Inequality

Social inequality is a multi-faceted reality present within every region and nation in the world. The more known forms of inequality are those between richer and poorer countries, developing and

developed nations, or the global south and the global north. To better understand social inequality, a comprehensive approach that utilizes the fields of political science, social science, and the humanities is required [9]. These disciplines, along with an understanding of structural functionalism provide a framework for understanding the power struggles so inherent to social inequality [10]. Flowing from conflict theories, social inequality is defined as the social, financial, and political power struggle between those who hold power and those who do not. Collier [11] refers to this power struggle within the global south as “the conflict trap” where rebellion, political strife, military regimes, civil war, and short-lived governments are indicative of social inequality.

The United Nations [12] further operationalized social inequality into six explicit categories: (1) inequalities in the distribution of income, (2) inequalities in the distribution of assets, (3) inequalities in the distribution of employment, (4) inequalities in access to knowledge, (5) political inequalities, and (6) inequalities in access to medical services, social security, and safety. In sum, lack of income for individuals and governments indicates social inequality and motivates other aspects of social inequality. These types of inequalities have debilitating consequences at household as well as individual levels. Clearly, these dimensions of inequality are better understood as integrated and overlapping and not as independent entities.

Some would argue that the social inequality gap has increased due to the globalization of the world. For example, Oatley [13] suggested that globalization has increased the inequality gap by simultaneously enhancing wealth for the rich and increasing poverty for the poor. It has transformed social inequality from the nation state realm into an international problem. Globalization is seen to create a class structure amongst nations that perpetuates and enhances social inequality for those nation states that are currently classified as developing [9]. “Developing nations” depend on “developed nations” for trade, financial assistance, political stability, and protections which perpetuate inequality and inequity [9]. The global south suffers from violence, political strife, and high mortality rates due to this uneven distribution of wealth [11] and is basically seen as a producer of raw materials that are cheaply sold to the global north where they are processed and re-sold at higher profit margins. As Immanuel Wallerstein [14] has theorized, “developed” or “core” nations rely upon “developing” or “peripheral” nations to maintain a financially advantageous, if inequitable, interrelationship.

Economic globalization and trade relations amongst the nations have therefore enhanced the disparity of wealth. Savoia and colleagues [15] attributed the disparity of wealth to a lack of market economy institutions amongst the nations in the global south. They noted that countries possessing stable market economy institutions experience prosperity, while those that do not experience this stability had increased poverty [15]. As economic imbalance between developed countries and developing countries continue, a significant disparity throughout all regions of the world persists because developing countries have not been allowed to catch up. For example, Mexico, considered a developing country, continues to struggle economically even though it maintains membership in the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). However, Ferrier [16] found only slight economic growth for Mexico since it joined NAFTA. Moreover, this disparity often drives “peripheral” nations to seek out opportunities for wealth creation outside the established inequitable or exploitative interrelationship with “core” nations [14,17]. These may involve the evolution of profitable, but illegal activities that exploit “black market” economies both between “core” and “peripheral” nations, and within the “peripheral” nations themselves, including phenomena such as illegal trade, war

profiteering, and human trafficking. As Rahman [17] suggested, “as we continue to enjoy the global economic system, human traffickers have been practically ignored culminating in [an] enormous chunk of wealth accrued through illegal business practices” leading to devastating consequences on individuals and families.

3. The Global Slave Trade and Human Trafficking Around the World

“Trafficking in persons” and “human trafficking” have been used interchangeably and described as the act of recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, or obtaining a person for compelled labor or commercial sex acts through the use of force, fraud, or coercion [18]. The *Trafficking Victims Protection Act* (TVPA) of 2000 (Pub. L. 106-386) and the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children* or the *Palermo Protocol* describes trafficking using a number of different terms, including involuntary servitude, slavery or practices similar to slavery, debt bondage, and forced labor. Essential to the definition of human trafficking is that it can include but does not require movement [18]. People may be considered victims of trafficking regardless of whether they were born into a state of servitude, transported to the exploitative situation, previously consented to work for a trafficker, or participated in a crime as a direct result of being trafficked. The United Nations, under the *Palermo Protocol*, adopted the following global definition for human trafficking:

Trafficking in persons shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, or deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs [19].

Based on its established relationship to poverty and violence, and its exploitative, profiteering nature, human trafficking has become the most prevalent manifestation of contemporary slavery in the world today. Slavery has been defined as the permanent, violent domination of discrimination against persons [20]. There is agreement among scholars and legislators that violence or the threat of violence for the control of another person is the central element of slavery. This broadens the definition to include both historical and contemporary slavery where people are forced to work through violence for no compensation. As Androff [20] noted, a significant difference between contemporary and historical slavery is that “only recently has the problem of contemporary slavery received attention from social scientists, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and in the [scholarly] literature”.

Contemporary slavery violates universal human rights according to Article 4 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and Article 8 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. These articles prohibit slavery, forced labor, servitude and the slave trade. Article 7 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* articulates the right to just and favorable work conditions, including fair remuneration, and safe and healthy working conditions [20].

The proliferation of contemporary slavery, despite legal sanctions against it, points to a greater need for global awareness, prevention, intervention, and advocacy [17,20,21]

Modern slavery can be overt in many instances but accurate and reliable data are difficult to come by [22]. Tactics to keep the industry hidden are vast, and victims may not even identify that they are such due to the nature of their entrapment [23]. For example, families in developing countries who are economically disadvantaged are lured by the promise of income to better the whole if they sacrifice a part of the family with a child [22]. In many West African countries, young women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are lured under the same premise of making enough money to support their families [24]. They are entrapped by being told that they are supposedly going to another geographical location to work a job as a waitress, hotel maid, or other comparable job [22,24]. Family, friends, and colleagues accept the offers unquestionably in earnest, hoping for funds that are desperately needed [23].

Poverty makes women across a variety of countries vulnerable to the modern-day sex slave trade. For example, in Albania, young women are enticed with seemingly promising offers of employment as nannies or in restaurants and are trafficked to Italy or Greece to be sold into prostitution and domestic servitude [25]. Bulgarian women reported being emotionally manipulated by being groomed by a man who courts them until they are willing to follow him anywhere [26]. A recent and disturbing trend in the United Kingdom is for traffickers to prey on underage runaway women who are consequently enslaved in the sex trade [27]. Runaways are offered luxuries in material and emotional support never experienced in their homes [28]. A person pretending to be a significant other exploits them later to their “friends” and the runaway girl becomes entrapped in slavery [28]. A case study in the United States revealed that a resident Mexican-American family led a trafficking operation using illegal Mexican natives as their victims [29]. Victims were told they would make money through working at a family-owned restaurant and working on farms in the United States, only to be told they had to work off the transportation fee after arriving at their destination [29]. Yet another disturbing trend in trafficking industry is the training of victims as future perpetrators. Nigerian women who were trafficked into Netherlands as domestic servants are trained to recruit girls from back in Nigeria to be victimized as sex slaves [30].

Trafficking is a global issue not concentrated to a particular region or continent [18], as indicated by the range of countries discussed above. Bulgaria, Ukraine, Romania, and Moldova are the main sources of trafficking victims within the European Union [25,26]. According to Hughes [31], evidence gathered from reports compiled by non-governmental organizations in the former Soviet Union showed that Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus had the highest number of women recruited to so-called marriage agencies that sell out women for exploitation [31]. Those countries were followed by Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, and Uzbekistan [30]. Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal are source, transit, and destination countries for trafficked women and children in West Africa [32]. The trafficking of young children from rural areas to small cities has risen especially in Mali, Benin, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Ghana to the Ivory Coast’s commercial farms [32]. Ugandan girls are lured to the Gulf States with the promise of a job only to be sold into prostitution [32]. South Africa is a regional hub for international trafficking, serving as a source and destination for trafficking; typically receiving women from Thailand, China and Eastern Europe in addition to African nations [32]. Periods of political instability and conflict in countries like Cambodia and Burma provided trafficking perpetrators an

opportunity to expand the crime and their profits [33]. The networks that traffic and smuggle people through the *Golden Triangle* (Burma, Thailand, and Laos) are also linked to trafficking in weapons and illicit drugs [33].

Human trafficking operations are not limited to peripheral or developing parts of the world, but also form a large part of the black market in developed or “core” nations. Trafficking and other criminal activities in Japan are often hidden from scrutiny by officials due to legally obtained “entertainment visas” [34]. Destination and source countries for victims in Asia are Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, Myanmar, and Vietnam. Pakistan and North Korea also source a large number of victims in Asia [34]. In the United States, victims are trafficked from other countries as a destination location; with large numbers of victims from Vietnam, Russia, Romania, and Mexico [18]. It is also important to note that there are a large number of victims from the United States that are trafficked domestically [30]. The United Kingdom, France, and Spain are also destination locations for trafficking victims, particularly in the sex and domestic servitude industries [26,31,32]. As these examples show, efforts at raising public awareness, policing, and service provision quickly take on global proportions, and necessitate both international and intra-national efforts.

4. Combating Trafficking through Capacity Building

Within the last decade, ending human trafficking has been a new political initiative for governments worldwide [35]. The United Nations enacted the *Palermo Protocol* in 2003 with 117 signatory countries [21,36]. The treaty explicitly defines human trafficking, outlines that the perpetrators should be punishable by law, and states that victims should be protected from prosecution for any crimes committed while enslaved [21]. Inspired by the United Nations convention, the 28 countries belonging to the European Union recognized the need for new and explicit policy dealing with human trafficking in 2003 [36]. Similarly, the United States introduced legislation to create a new office dedicated solely to trafficking in persons in 2001, complete with new policies criminalizing modern slavery and providing resources for victims [20]. Thus far, other continental unions have not passed policies specifically noting how the signatory countries would deal with cross-border human trafficking issues [35]. However, if a country is a signatory to the United Nations treaty, it is bound by the laws set in the treaty [36,37].

The authors sought to identify or make contact with organizations and programs currently conducting anti-slavery and trafficking prevention and intervention efforts that addressed issues of poverty and social inequality. Table 1 presents the results of that research, listing reputable international and domestic agencies committed to ending modern slavery through attention to issues of social inequality and financial insecurity. For the purposes of this paper, reputation of the organization is operationalized to indicate active service provision, charitable or not-for-profit status, participation in both intra- and international coalitions or collaborative efforts, and an active connection with other NGO or governmental bodies with a mandate to enforce anti-trafficking laws and policies.

Table 1. International anti-slavery and human trafficking programs, alphabetical by country or geographic region.

Country or Region	Organization	Services	Website
Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands	Project Respect	Outreach services, emergency accommodation, support groups, prevention services, intensive case management	[38]
Belgium	Samila Foundation	Prevention services, outreach services	[39]
Cambodia	Rapha House	Safe house, rehabilitation and reintegration programs	[40]
Estonia	Living for Tomorrow	Hotline, policy advocacy, awareness campaigns, and preventative services	[41]
France	Committee Against Modern Slavery	Legal aid, health services, rehabilitation facility	[42]
	Esclavage Tolerance Zero	Residential rehabilitation program	[43]
Greece and Ukraine	A21 Campaign	Awareness campaigns, safe-houses, rehabilitation program, skills training, legal aid, policy advocacy	[44]
Ireland	Ruhama	Counseling services, skills training	[45]
Italy	On The Road	Policy advocacy, rehabilitation, and awareness programs	[46]
Latvia	Shelter/Safe House	Residential services, outreach and aftercare services.	[47]
Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq	International Rescue Committee	Refugee work, policy advocacy, residential program, counseling services	[48]
The Netherlands	La Strada International	Policy advocacy, intensive case management	[49]
Philippines	My Refuge House	Safe house, rehabilitation program	[50]
Switzerland	International Office of Migration	Safe houses, skills training, health services, mental health services	[51]
Thailand and Burma	Life Impact International	Prevention programs, intensive management, legal aid	[52]
United Kingdom	Helen Bamber Foundation	Policy advocacy, legal aid, rehabilitation services	[53]
	Anti-Slavery International	Skills training, mental health services, policy advocacy	[54]
	STOP THE TRAFFIK	Policy advocacy, awareness campaigns	[55]
United States	International Justice Mission	Legal aid, rehabilitation services	[56]
	Not For Sale	Policy advocacy, awareness campaign	[57]
	Love 146	Prevention services, rehabilitation services, awareness campaign	[58]
	Made In A Free World	Skills training, awareness campaign	[59]
	Free The Slaves	Legal and policy advocacy.	[60]
	Oasis	Policy advocacy, awareness campaign	[61]

Many international anti-trafficking efforts are veered towards the criminal aspect of the phenomenon while placing less emphasis on the psycho-social services that victims and survivors typically require. However, some countries, including Italy, France, and the Netherlands, do have policies that dictate that the government will fund non-governmental organizations that combat human trafficking [22]. In the Netherlands, La Strada International receives government funds to help

subsidize many services they offer [62]. Many victims of human trafficking are more likely to come in contact with a non-governmental organization than law enforcement to seek help [63]. As Table 1 shows, reputable international and domestic agencies committed to ending modern slavery through attention to issues of social inequality and financial insecurity are currently in operation. Combating global inequality has long been perceived as central to the campaign to promote human rights and social betterment throughout the world [2,4,7,15]. Recently, more attention is being given to human trafficking and social inequality [8,22,35,63]. This article supports a call for attention to the relationship between these two important human rights issues, and to establish the correlation between inequality and instances of sexual and other forms of trafficking throughout the world [64].

5. Conclusions

At a recent meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Economic and Environmental Forum in Prague, it was noted that global awareness to the problem of trafficking was increasing, but instances of trafficking were also on the rise [65]. Consciousness-raising efforts aimed at stressing the illegality of trafficking must be combined with efforts that promote economic stability and offer solutions for families deemed most "at-risk" within source nations [25,66,67]. Efforts such as these address both the legal and juridical nature of trafficking as a crime, but also address the potentially causative or exacerbating effects of inequality in both core and peripheral nations [63,66]. Moreover, calls for core destination regions, such as the United States and Western Europe to promote strong prohibitions and coordinated community responses to punish trafficking perpetrators while supporting current and former victims should be strongly promoted to impact the OSCE findings [26,31,32].

Increasingly, social welfare advocates are recognizing the global interconnectedness of practices and contexts that violate human rights and enhance social injustice. Advocates also understand that narrow intervention or prevention approaches are not effective when dealing with complex problems like human trafficking. The challenges faced by many of the organizations combating contemporary slavery and human trafficking throughout the world are directly linked to efforts at combating poverty, economic insecurity and social inequality across the globe. While these linkages are evinced greatly on the level of service provision in the third sector, policy change has been slow to respond to better equip social welfare advocates in this task [6,8]. Policy change offers a framework for understanding the problem of trafficking within its various contexts. It enables advocates to merge direct services to victims and their families with policy change to best address the global problem of slavery and human trafficking.

For example, while La Strada in the Netherlands and Oasis in the United States offer complementary services, such as job training and vocational trade skills in hairdressing, dressmaking, catering, and other trades, the social welfare platforms within the national contexts are markedly different. For example, La Strada's efforts at victim support, including healthcare and job training, benefit from established national subsidy or, in the case of healthcare, complete coverage. Oasis, by contrast, may attempt to subsidize services through governmental or philanthropic grants, but cannot guarantee such coverage for its services, nor rely upon government involvement in its mission. Moreover, discrepant policies may make efforts at family reunification difficult given the international scope of the trafficking process. Though very much a global problem, efforts at treaty reform and

inter-continental agreements may promote education, sensitization, and outreach efforts that are also specifically targeted at the family and relevant community [18].

This means that social welfare advocates who are involved in direct service with victims must also understand or be involved with macro efforts with multiple partners, and *vice versa*. As Chang and Kim [68] noted, effective intervention with complex problems (like trafficking) requires the identification of all stakeholders. Using current policy in the United States as an example, the authors noted:

In order to protect the rights of trafficked persons and to work toward the elimination of trafficking, human rights advocates across multiple sectors should advance a movement based on shared goals. Current U.S. policies and procedures addressing trafficking divert attention away from underlying root causes and deprive certain trafficked persons of full access to immigration and labor protections. Moreover, related U.S. policies on labor migration, reproductive, and sexual health rights operate to restrict the rights of not only trafficked persons, but more generally migrant workers and women. New understandings of trafficking as it impacts and is affected by a broad spectrum of issues connect advocates in different but related fields. This reconceptualization can serve to build an inter-sectoral movement for the labor and reproductive and sexual health rights of all individuals, regardless of occupation, citizenship or immigration status [68] (p. 344).

These efforts must be collaborative in nature and build significant coalitions between policy makers, advocates, and the general public [1,22,63]. In conclusion, while efforts in reducing trafficking as a crime by prosecuting and punishing offenders should be supported, a broader perspective requires greater focus on the person in their environments. Flowing from this model, advocates should seek to collaboratively create environments that empower children and women; advocate structures that reduce oppression against women and children; challenge local or global policies that enable trafficking (including laws that, at face value, are meant to reduce trafficking); and reduce stressful conditions while building resilience among stressed communities and victimized individuals. These broad recommendations should be operationalized contextually, taking cognizance of the different structures in various cultures that enhance the trafficking of persons.

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Author Contributions

Conceived and designed the conceptual frame: David Okech and John R. Barner. Wrote the manuscript: John R. Barner, Meghan A. Camp and David Okech. Commented on and revised the manuscript: David Okech and John R. Barner. Provided intellectual input: Meghan A. Camp.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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