

Women: Invisible in Labor and Labor Trafficking



Media reports and prosecution data alone suggest that only men are found in labor trafficking, also known as forced labor, and only women in sex trafficking. In fact, men and boys are also subjected to sex trafficking while women and girls are also subjected to labor trafficking. These assumptions and stereotypes are harmful because they impede efforts to identify and provide services to labor trafficked women, target prevention strategies within industries where women are susceptible to labor trafficking, and integrate labor trafficking into gender-based development work. Women's concentration in informal labor sectors without legal protections and their gender-specific vulnerabilities suggest that women face labor trafficking much more than is reported, and, that women are just as invisible within labor trafficking as they are within labor.

Women in the Global Workforce

According to the International Labour Organization's (ILO) 2011 Global Employment Trends Report, women constitute half of the globally employed, generally divided among the services, industrial and agricultural sectors. More women than men work in the services sector (46.8% to 40.7%) with this gap having grown over the past decade. More women than men work in

the agricultural sector as well (37.6% to 33.3%). While fewer women than men work in the industrial sector, they still represented a sizable population (15.6% to 26%).

Without equal access to education, economic opportunity and social mobility, women are overrepresented in the informal labor sector without labor laws that offer critical workplace protections. Worldwide, South Asia has the highest rate of participation in the informal labor sector and it is comprised primarily of women. India, Nepal and Pakistan have the largest gender gaps in this sector. These jobs are marked by low pay, long hours and no contracts – child care, housekeeping, cooking, planting and harvesting agriculture, janitorial services, and waitressing. Out of the reach of workplace protections, discrimination, harassment, unsafe conditions, exploitation, abuse, and sexual violence are rampant. It comes as no surprise then, that human trafficking flourishes in this environment.

Women Migrating for Work

Migration can also push women into the informal labor sector, thereby increasing the likelihood of exploitation and labor trafficking. Women comprise 49% of the world's migrants. In the past, women migrated primarily to reunite with family members but women and girls are increasingly migrating for work. In some

Globally, women have been found in forced labor in:

- ***Domestic work***
- ***Garment manufacturing***
- ***Agriculture***
- ***Conflict minerals mining***
- ***Custodial work***
- ***Restaurants***
- ***Food service***
- ***Carpet weaving***
- ***Brick kilns***
- ***Entertainment clubs***

regions, women are also migrating to escape gender-based violence. They seek to improve their circumstances through new economic opportunities often to support themselves or family members as the sole breadwinner. Yet destination countries offer legal, temporary migration opportunities that predominantly offer positions to men in construction and agriculture. Education and financial requirements also prevent more women than men from meeting requirements to migrate lawfully. As a result, legal migration for women can be limited. They are left to pursue unlawful migration, which, according to the ILO, then pushes women migrants into the informal sector leaving them susceptible to exploitation, abuse and trafficking.

Domestic Workers

Worldwide, all domestic workers have one thing in common – an unregulated workplace without inspection and out of the public’s view. The situation is ripe for labor exploitation and at the extreme, human trafficking. A major global trend is the migration of women to Gulf States and the Middle East for domestic worker positions as childcare providers, elder caregivers, cooks and cleaners in private homes. Recruitment agencies are largely unregulated, which makes it easy for terms and conditions to be misrepresented. Agencies and informal recruiters charge exorbitant fees to the workers and often the employers, who then pass those fees on to the workers. The workers must pay off this massive debt with relatively low wages.

In addition to debt bondage, there are widespread reports of physical abuse, sexual assault, denial of health care, threats of deportation, withholding immigration papers, isolation from family and friends, and poor living conditions, sometimes resulting in tragedies like suicide. Employers psychologically shackle their domestic workers so they are not free to end their employment without devastating consequences, crossing the line into domestic servitude, a form of human trafficking.

Garment Manufacturing

Women comprise the vast majority of workers in the garment and textile industries. The garment industry’s supply chain includes retailers, brand owners, and manufacturing contractors. To make a profit, some contractors are willing to cut corners on workers’ safety and wages. Reports of sweatshops detail long hours; low pay; poor lighting and

ventilation; and erratic health, safety and labor inspections. In 2011, 4,000 garment workers in Cambodia fainted because of noxious fumes in a warehouse where windows did not open.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor and State, forced labor in garment manufacturing persists globally, most acutely in Argentina, China, India, Jordan, Malaysia and Thailand, and cases have generally been identified worldwide. In some instances, workers are far from home, dependent upon their employer for housing, food and transportation. Additionally, trafficking is not only found in settings with thousands of workers in large warehouses, but also in small and isolated manufacturing sites that are less likely to be noticed let alone inspected. These controlled and isolated environments have led to many cases of labor trafficking of women.

Agriculture

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, forced labor is prevalent in the production, cultivation and harvesting of a range of agricultural products, including cotton, sugarcane, rice, cocoa, tobacco, beans, corn, peanuts, rubber, sesame, sunflowers and wheat according to the U.S. Department of Labor. The ILO reports that women represent more than 70% of the agricultural workforce in South Asia and 59% in sub-Saharan Africa.

Like other industries in which women work, agricultural work is characterized by long hours and low pay, but can also be dangerous and physically demanding. Sexual harassment, physical abuse and sexual violence abound, aided by remote locations where workers have no access to communication or transportation. In India, where bonded labor is prevalent in agriculture, traffickers use sexual violence and physical abuse in addition to debt bondage to compel labor. In an environment already marked by exploitation, agricultural workers are often exempt from a country’s labor laws, left without traditional workplace protections. Women’s invisibility as agricultural workers only compounds the exploitative conditions and allows human trafficking to occur.

By examining where women work, often where labor protections are nonexistent or weakest, we can begin to understand where women are forced to work as well and why the conditions lend themselves to human trafficking. Moreover, this allows us to better understand the broader implications of global gender inequities.