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New Directions in Research on Human Trafficking

By
RONALD WEITZER

This article evaluates four popular claims regarding human trafficking's international magnitude, trends, and seriousness relative to other illicit global activities. I find that the claims are neither evidence-based nor verifiable. Second, an argument is made for carefully conducted microlevel research on trafficking. Several such studies are described, including the contributions to this volume of *The ANNALS*. I argue for microlevel research, which has advantages over grand, macrolevel claims—advantages that are both quantitative (i.e., identifying the magnitude of trafficking within a measurable context) and qualitative (i.e., documenting complexities in lived experiences)—and is better suited to formulating contextually appropriate policy and enforcement responses.

Keywords: sex trafficking; labor trafficking; microlevel research; evidence-based policy

Over the past 20 years, human trafficking has generated a tremendous amount of public attention throughout the world. The problem has received growing coverage in the media; antitrafficking activism has skyrocketed; and most countries have created new policies, laws, and enforcement mechanisms to tackle the problem.¹ Yet much of the discourse, policymaking, and enforcement has lacked an evidence basis, because so little high-quality research has been done on the topic (Weitzer 2011; Zhang 2012).

Much of the popular writing on human trafficking has been anecdotal or sensationalistic, and most scholarly publications are either general overviews of the problem or critiques of the literature. A review of one hundred academic articles found that few contained original data and most treated as “sources” or

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“evidence” the assertions of government agencies and international organizations, even though these bodies had consistently failed to reveal their sources (Zhang 2009). While many claims about trafficking have been made in popular and academic writings, rarely have these claims been subjected to rigorous scientific scrutiny (Gozdziak and Collett 2005; Zhang 2012).

Another problem is that most writing, policymaking, and law enforcement has focused on the problem of sexual exploitation (Chuang 2010; UNODC 2006, 2012), and much of this takes the form of formulaic, sensationalized morality tales of sexual abuse—highlighting lurid or disturbing cases and presenting them as typical (Andrijasevic 2007; Snajdr 2013). Such representations are useful for NGOs that have a vested interest in attracting media attention, funding, government support, and public involvement, and they are also standard currency among celebrities who have taken up the cause, as Dina Francesca Haynes describes in her contribution to this volume. She shows how celebrities with little or no expertise rise to become “experts” on sex trafficking, how their pronouncements or activism help to enhance their reputations and careers, and how NGOs and government officials leverage these celebrities for their own interests.

What gets sidelined in the focus on sex trafficking is labor trafficking—in agriculture, manufacturing, fishing, mining, and domestic service. Labor under fraudulent or coercive circumstances can be quite harsh and manifests itself in unfair deductions from wages, lack of pay altogether, confiscation of passports, inhuman working and living conditions, deprivation of liberty (e.g., preventing workers from leaving the workplace or making phone calls), beatings, and sexual assault. Several of the articles in this volume address labor trafficking—those by Danièle Bélanger, Denise Brennan, Neil Howard, Munim Joarder, Paul Miller, Georgi Petrunov, and Sheldon Zhang—but much more research is needed in this domain.

Definitional problems plague both scholarly and policy discussions of human trafficking. Critiques of the literature often point to the lack of consensus on a definition of trafficking—with some analysts insisting that virtually any illegal migration for the purpose of obtaining work, and especially migration leading to prostitution, is trafficking—irrespective of whether the individual consented or was aware of the type and conditions of work at the destination (e.g., Kara 2009; Yen 2008). Some governments engage in this conflation as well, mixing human smuggling and trafficking into their official figures or legal code (United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime [UNODC] 2006, 44; Zhang 2012) or equating trafficking and slavery in official discourse if not in law (Chuang 2013; Weitzer 2007). Georgi Petrunov points out in his article in this volume that, according to Bulgarian law, anyone who “recruits, transports, conceals, or admits” a person for sexual activities, forced labor, or removal of bodily organs is defined as a trafficker “regardless of their consent.” In other words, simple recruitment of a consenting adult for any of these activities is a trafficking offense. In Brazil, sex trafficking is defined by law as “promoting, intermediating, or facilitating the entry of women who practice prostitution into national territory or the exit of women who will practice prostitution abroad”—whether or not force, deception, or exploitation is involved.² Research on cases prosecuted under this law reveals that they involved

no coercion, deception, or exploitation, and that “the law is being used as a way to prosecute sex work, which gets around the fact that adult self-prostitution is not illegal” in Brazil (Blanchette and Silva 2012, 114). Finally, until recently the U.S. government made a clear distinction between human trafficking and slavery, but in 2012 it inexplicably began conflating trafficking with both slavery and forced labor, resulting in a huge spike in the alleged number of trafficking/slavery victims (U.S. Department of State 2012, 7, 44). This is an example of what Chuang (2013) calls “exploitation creep.”

Most governments make distinctions between “smuggling” (where the actor consents and co-participates in the migration process) and “trafficking” (where at least some deception or coercion is involved in the recruitment and/or labor process). This distinction is enshrined in international trafficking conventions and in U.S. law, which defines trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, or harboring of a person, for the purpose of labor, that involves the use of “force, fraud, or coercion” of adults or the involvement of youth under age 18.³ The 2000 UN convention, known as the Palermo protocol, is both broader and more opaque: trafficking includes “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” (UNODC 2004, 42). It defines “exploitation” tautologically as “exploitation” and fails to define “abuse of power,” “vulnerability,” and “control.” Empirical studies show just how difficult it is to apply the Palermo definition in practice and document cases where the distinction between smuggling and trafficking is blurred—e.g., where smuggling involves vulnerability and exploitation but not deception or coercion (Skilbrei and Tveit 2008).

A separate category is *debt bondage*, a type of trafficking according to some authorities. The U.S. government defines a bond or debt as “a form of coercion” and as a “threat of financial harm” if not repaid (U.S. Department of State 2012, 34), and the International Labour Organization (ILO) considers “bonded labor” a form of “forced labor” (Derks 2010). An alternative position recognizes that incurring a debt to a broker or employer is a staple of labor migration for resource-poor migrants and that these relationships exist on a continuum (Busza 2004; Sandy 2009). The key variables are the specifics of the contractual agreement, the working conditions, and the consequences of nonrepayment—variables that can be used to determine if a debt is truly coercive, fraudulent, or exploitative or instead simply a loan to be repaid. The category of indebtedness should be disaggregated into arrangements that do and do not fit under the trafficking rubric of “force, fraud, or coercion.”

In light of these problems and to enhance scholarly and policy work in this domain, we need carefully conducted studies that (1) clearly define key terms, (2) survey or interview migrants and their facilitators in all types of trafficking, (3) document the social and ecological dynamics of migration and trafficking in specific contexts, and (4) examine patterns in law enforcement practices and rescue operations. Only a few researchers have conducted carefully designed empirical studies in this field. Such work is featured in this volume of *The ANNALS*. Here, I preview these studies and present some additional examples

of research that pushes our understanding of human trafficking in new directions. Before doing so, I outline and critique the most frequently made claims about human trafficking.

Popular Claims Regarding Human Trafficking

Human trafficking has always existed in various forms but was not considered a serious social problem until recently, as evidenced by official discourse and media reporting (Farrell and Fahy 2009; Gulati 2011; Weitzer 2007). Today, trafficking has been socially constructed in a particular way—both in terms of its magnitude and in the often-melodramatic depictions of victims, who are usually presented as victims of sexual (rather than labor) exploitation and in an extreme manner that is often formulaic and decontextualized. Iris Yen, for example, claims that persons trafficked into sex work are “essentially slaves” and that “traffickers routinely beat, rape, starve, confine, torture, and psychologically and emotionally abuse the women” (2008, 656, 659–660). And Siddharth Kara proclaims that “the contemporary sex trafficking industry involves the systematic rape, torture, enslavement, and murder of millions of women and children” (Kara 2009, 15). Yen and Kara provide no evidence in support of such sweeping indictments, and, unfortunately, such sensationalized depictions are all too common and mask the complexities, nuances, and contingencies characterizing many empirical cases.

Four central claims are frequently made regarding human trafficking’s magnitude—claims that have now become the unquestioned, conventional wisdom:

- The number of trafficking victims worldwide is huge;
- The magnitude of trafficking is steadily growing worldwide;
- Human trafficking is the second or third largest organized criminal enterprise in the world, after illegal drug and weapons trading; and
- Sex trafficking is more prevalent and/or more serious than labor trafficking.

Is there compelling evidence in support of any of these assertions?

A huge worldwide problem?

When estimating the magnitude of any illicit enterprise (be it drug sales, illegal gambling, the arms trade, or prostitution), it is crucial that analysts carefully examine the quality of the data sources and the procedures used to arrive at figures. With human trafficking, as with drug and arms trafficking and other illicit global enterprises, “the numbers are often highly suspect but nevertheless popularized and rarely critically scrutinized,” and for activists, governments, and the media “there are strong incentives to accept and reproduce rather than challenge and critique them” (Andreas 2010, 33; cf. Davies 2009; Markon 2007; Weitzer 2007).

According to many activists, government officials, and some scholars, human trafficking has reached epic levels worldwide—victimizing “millions” of people

every year. The U.S. government proclaimed in 2002 that as many as four million people worldwide were “bought, sold, transported, and held against their will in slave-like conditions” (U.S. Department of State 2002, 1). In 2005, the ILO declared that 2.45 million persons were engaged in forced labor as a result of trafficking (ILO 2005a, 4), which inexplicably jumped to 9.1 million in 2012 (ILO 2012). And in 2010, the U.S. government asserted that 0.18 percent of the world’s population were current trafficking victims—trafficking defined as “forced labor, bonded labor, and forced prostitution” (U.S. Department of State 2010, 7). No sources were provided to document any of these figures. Likewise, Kevin Bales claims that “the number of slaves in the world today is 27 million” (Bales 2004, 8); Bales says the figure is “a good guess” but offers no evidence or even a rough idea of how he arrived at it.⁴ Unfortunately, many media and government sources have treated this figure as factual—e.g., it appears in the most recent U.S. State Department’s *Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report* (2013, 7).

Moving from the international stage to national contexts, we see similar high and dubious numbers. For Thailand, Bales offers a “conservative estimate” of thirty-five thousand “sex slaves”—or 5 percent of all prostitutes in the country—without any documentation (Bales 2004, 43). In Cambodia, NGOs have repeatedly claimed that eighty thousand to one hundred thousand women and children are trafficked into sex exploitation every year. Yet “no study or empirical data in any form can be located to support the numbers” (Steinfatt 2011, 447, 449). Steinfatt’s own research reported a much lower number: 1,058 trafficked into sex work in 2008 out of a population of 27,925 sex workers (Steinfatt and Baker 2011, 40).⁵ Note that the total number of sex workers in Steinfatt’s study is far lower than the NGO number of “trafficked” sex workers in Cambodia.

The U.S. government recently reported that only 0.4 percent of the “estimated victims” of human trafficking worldwide had been officially “identified” (U.S. Department of State 2010, 7). This assumes that the baseline—“estimated victims”—is even remotely reliable, yet the report provides no source for the number of either estimated or identified victims, nor does it define what “identified” means.⁶ Nevertheless, official figures from other sources show that there is a huge discrepancy between the claimed magnitude of human trafficking and the number of victims identified and assisted by authorities or the number of traffickers prosecuted and convicted. In the United States itself, the number of officially confirmed victims or convicted traffickers pales in comparison to the official claim that as many as 17,500 individuals are trafficked into the country every year (Banks and Kyckelhahn 2011, 3; U.S. Department of State 2007).

We should not expect the number of assisted victims to be similar to the estimated number of victims: it is inherently difficult to locate victims and build criminal cases against perpetrators operating within clandestine markets (see Farrell and Pfeffer’s contribution in this volume). Still, the disparity between the number of alleged and confirmed victims raises serious questions about the magnitude of the problem.

Some agencies have cast doubt on the very idea of producing macrolevel estimates. The U.S. Government Accountability Office ([GAO] 2006, 2, 10) and the ILO (2005a, 13, 14) have identified numerous problems with the way macrolevel

figures are produced. And independent analysts criticize the use of different definitions of “victims” in constructing worldwide estimates; the practice of extrapolating from a few documented victims to the entire victim population; and “estimates” that lump smuggled laborers into the trafficking category regardless of their consent and conditions of labor (Gozdziak and Collett 2005; Jahic and Finckenauer 2005; Zhang 2009, 2012).

One conclusion is inescapable: The claim that human trafficking victimizes a massive number of people is unsubstantiated; it simply cannot be substantiated at the macrointernational level. The glaring evidentiary problems are so severe that even rough estimates of the worldwide magnitude of this hidden enterprise are destined to be fatally flawed. The same argument applies to national-level estimates.

Steadily increasing in magnitude?

Not only is human trafficking depicted as a huge problem, it is also said to be escalating. Trafficking “is expanding at an ever-accelerating rate” and “the volume just keeps increasing” (Farr 2005, 3). Kara asserts, tautologically, that the “demand for sex services has increased as a result of the increased use of sex slaves” (Kara 2009, 37). And Shelley thinks that trafficking is “one of the fastest growing forms of transnational crime worldwide” and that it “is increasing as both demand and supply for people are rising” (Shelley 2010, 2, 4).

There are three fundamental problems with claims about global trends: (1) the clandestine nature of trafficking (which makes it difficult to obtain data); (2) the lack of a solid baseline from which changes over time can be measured; and (3) possible market saturation, especially for sexual commerce: the notion that sex trafficking is steadily increasing assumes (a) that demand is also expanding and (b) that the local supply of sex workers is insufficient to meet the demand.

Regarding the third problem, research in Cambodia found that trafficking decreased by more than half between 2002 and 2008, even while the number of sex workers reportedly increased (Steinfatt and Baker 2011, 40), which means that trafficking can also decrease when the local sex market is stable or contracting. In other countries or regions, human trafficking may have grown or diminished over time, but this does not mean that the problem is steadily increasing worldwide. For the reasons noted above, I argue that global trends simply cannot be estimated.

A leading criminal enterprise?

It is frequently asserted that, in profitability or size, human trafficking is the second- or third-largest criminal enterprise in the world, after drug and arms trafficking. The key U.S. antitrafficking law declares that human trafficking “is the fastest growing source of profits for organized criminal enterprises worldwide”;⁷ and in 2004 the U.S. State Department proclaimed that “human trafficking is the third largest criminal enterprise in the world” (U.S. Department of State 2004, 14). In 2006 the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

elevated the rank of human trafficking: it is “tied with arms dealing as the second-largest criminal industry in the world, and is the fastest growing” (2006, 1). The FBI goes even further, claiming that “human sex trafficking” alone is “the fastest-growing business of organized crime and the third-largest criminal enterprise in the world” (FBI 2011). No evidence or verifiable sources have been supplied to support these claims and, in fact, they are impossible to substantiate given the clandestine nature of drug, arms, and human trafficking (Andreas 2010). As the UNODC points out, “Without a sense of the magnitude of the problem, it is impossible to prioritize human trafficking as an issue relative to other local or transnational threats” (2009, 12). Yet the claim seems to have become an article of faith for advocacy groups, official agencies, and the media. Many scholars question the extent to which organized crime is involved in human trafficking, noting that much of the assistance provided to migrants is small-scale—involving a single or a few facilitators—and therefore somewhat “disorganized.”

Estimates of profits are extremely mixed, which should itself cause skepticism. One claim, that trafficking is a \$5–\$7 billion annual enterprise, was demolished as mere “guesswork” because it was based on “a number of unknowns” (Jahic and Finckenauer 2005, 29). But some writers put the figure much higher: A 2005 ILO report estimated annual profits from all trafficked labor to be \$31.6 billion (Besler 2005). Despite appearing in only a working paper, the figure quickly became a “fact” cited by other organizations. Kara goes further, claiming \$36 billion in profits from sex trafficking alone. He also proclaims: “Only 4.2 percent of the world’s slaves are trafficked sex slaves, but they generate 39.1 percent of slaveholders’ profits” (Kara 2009, 19). To sustain such precise assertions about the proportion who are sex slaves and the profits derived from them in comparison to other slaves would require hard evidence on both dimensions—data that do not exist.

Sex trafficking eclipses other types of human trafficking?

Finally, there are contrasting claims regarding the kind of human trafficking that is most prevalent. Judging by feature films, documentaries, and newspaper reports, sex trafficking would appear to be the main problem (Farrell and Fahy 2009, 620; Gulati 2011). The same focus is evident in the proclamations of celebrity advocates, NGOs, international organizations, and many government officials. Sex trafficking was privileged over labor trafficking by the Bush administration, whose 2005 *TIP Report* declared that “the majority of transnational victims are trafficked into commercial sexual exploitation” (U.S. Department of State 2005, 6). Obama’s State Department takes the opposite position. The 2010 *TIP Report* states that “the majority of human trafficking in the world takes the form of forced labor. . . . Sex trafficking comprises a smaller but still significant portion of overall human trafficking” (U.S. Department of State 2010, 8–9). In 2005 the ILO reported that “forced commercial sexual exploitation represents 11 percent of all cases” of forced labor worldwide (ILO 2005b, 12). This figure can be challenged on the same grounds as other macro estimates—i.e., no evidence basis—but it is certainly plausible that the international market for all

types of cheap labor combined (in agriculture, manufacturing, mining, domestic service, etc.) eclipses the market for sexual services and therefore that trafficking or forced labor would be more prevalent outside the commercial sex sector. This points to the need for much more research on and government targeting of labor trafficking.

Macrolevel Research

None of the trafficking claims—huge magnitude, growing problem, ranking among criminal enterprises, most prevalent type—have been substantiated. It is impossible to satisfactorily count (or even estimate) the number of persons involved in or the magnitude of profits within an illicit, clandestine, underground economy at the macro level—nationally or internationally.⁸

The problems that plague macrolevel claims-making are mirrored in macrolevel research. Studies that attempt to compare nations regarding the number of trafficking victims are inherently flawed. One such study attempted to discern whether countries where prostitution is legal have better or worse human trafficking records than countries where prostitution is illegal (Cho, Dreher, and Neumayer 2012). The authors compared 161 countries using UNODC (2006) information from 113 sources (governments, the media, NGOs, research institutes, and international organizations). The UNODC, however, expressly cautioned against using its report to measure the number of victims within countries—“the report does not provide information regarding actual numbers of victims”—and identified myriad problems including the lack of a uniform definition of trafficking across countries; the lack of transparency in data collection and reporting in many nations; the hodgepodge nature of the 113 sources; and the mix of smuggling, trafficking, and irregular migration numbers in some country figures (UNODC 2006, 37, 44–45). Cho, Dreher, and Neumayer noted these problems and acknowledged that their figures did “not reflect actual trafficking flows” and that it is “difficult, perhaps impossible, to find hard evidence” of a relationship between trafficking and any other phenomenon (Cho, Dreher, and Neumayer 2012, 70), but they proceeded to use the UNODC report anyway. Even more problematic, the authors relied on aggregate national human trafficking figures (lumping sex trafficking together with other kinds of human trafficking) in their attempt to assess whether legalizing prostitution increases or decreases the amount of all trafficking, not just sex trafficking. Thus, there is a glaring mismatch between the trafficking figures and their relationship to prostitution: The trafficking “data” are based on a compound of different types of trafficking, yet these generic figures are used to assess whether prostitution law is related to the incidence of all kinds of trafficking. More generally, Cho and colleague’s article is an object lesson in the dangers of attempting cross-national comparisons in the magnitude of human trafficking, yet it received wide publicity in the media.⁹

Equally flawed is a recent European Commission (2013) report, in which the commission attempted to rank twenty-seven European nations on the magnitude

of trafficking in three separate years, but relied on information drawn from different kinds of agencies in each nation and based on unstandardized definitions and methods. Some nations reported the number of officially “identified” victims while others reported a dubious category of “presumed” victims who had not been identified, and nations differed in their definitions of trafficking, their means of identifying victims, and in their reporting procedures.¹⁰ The commission acknowledged some of these problems but nevertheless reported its “findings” about country-level victimization, comparisons between countries, and trends over the three-year period.

The European Commission’s reliance on flawed data is magnified in the recent Global Slavery Index, which ranks 162 nations on the prevalence of slavery—defined as including human trafficking, forced labor, and slavery. Like the European report, the slavery index draws information from a medley of unstandardized and thus noncomparable sources. The sources include media stories; reports by NGOs and some government agencies; and population surveys in a few countries. In nations where no data are available, the authors engage in a bizarre exercise of “extrapolation” from nations where (dubious) data are available to “similar” nations lacking such data: “For example, the prevalence ratio from the UK study was assumed to be relevant to other European island nations such as Ireland and Iceland, whereas the prevalence ratio for USA was assumed to be relevant to developed Western European countries such as Germany” (Walk Free Foundation 2013, 111). For Germany, the report simply fits the country between an “upper bound” of slavery estimates (based on five eastern European nations) and a “lower bound” (based on the UK and United States). This procedure lacks scientific logic. On one hand, the authors impute “similarity” to nations while ignoring their particularities, and, on the other hand, there is no credible rationale for crudely situating a country numerically between some alleged upper- and lower-bound nations. The terminology is revealing: “assumed to be relevant” leads to the “best estimation that can be derived from the extrapolation within an assumed range” (Walk Free Foundation 2013, 111). If the initial highly dubious assumptions are erroneous, extrapolation is tantamount to guesswork.

The Walk Free report also seeks to “name and shame” what its authors consider the ten “worst” nations on the slavery/trafficking scale. Five of these are in Africa (Benin, Gabon, Gambia, Ivory Coast, Mauritania), and the other five are Haiti, India, Nepal, Moldova, and Pakistan. There is no reason to have even the slightest confidence in estimates drawn from such societies, where reliable data on all kinds of social problems are notoriously lacking.

A national-level population survey might be considered preferable to the efforts, described above, that draw from an odd hodgepodge of sources that are unstandardized across nations. It is not possible to create a representative national survey of victims, because they constitute a hidden population whose boundaries are unknown, thus preventing random sampling of them. But we can conduct surveys with a larger population that is amenable to probability-based sampling. A unique International Organization for Migration (IOM) survey was conducted in five European nations—all of which were believed to have major

trafficking problems. Sampling 5,513 randomly selected households, respondents were asked not about their personal experiences but instead whether a close family member had been trafficked.¹¹ One hundred and eight individuals (2 percent) reported having a family member who fit the survey's definition of a victim: twenty-two sex trafficking and eighty-six labor trafficking victims (Omar Mahmoud and Trebesch 2010). Given how rarely this research method has been used to measure trafficking and the potential reporting bias when using this method (sensitivity of the questions for respondent, ignorance of family members' experiences), it is not yet clear that it would qualify as a promising "new direction" for trafficking research; although it is probably less problematic for measuring labor trafficking than the more stigmatized sex trafficking. In-depth research at a lower level of aggregation than an entire nation can yield data of greater validity (Zhang 2009). The survey method is used in Munim Joarder and Paul Miller's study of Bangladeshi migrants in this volume of *The ANNALS*. Their survey was used to explore a sample of migrants' demographic backgrounds and victimization during migration and at the worksite, rather than estimating the scope of human trafficking at the national level.

Microlevel Research

Extravagant macrolevel assertions matter for at least two reasons: (1) if the claims are unfounded, they risk jettisoning other worthy causes and funding decisions regarding them, and (2) even if these claims are true they are of limited utility on the ground, where trafficking matters most.¹² Microlevel studies (in a city, town, or small region of a country) have both quantitative and qualitative advantages. If the data pertaining to this limited arena are reliable, they can provide (1) more valid victimization numbers (because of the limited parameters), (2) richer insights regarding actors' lived experiences, and (3) the potential to identify trafficking "hot spots" for targeted deployment of enforcement resources. I describe below some microlevel studies that have produced illuminating results.

The experiences of labor migrants, in the migration process and at work, fall along a broad spectrum. At one end of the continuum are individuals who have been thoroughly deceived about working conditions (e.g., pay, hours, amenities) at the destination, have their passports confiscated, are confined to the workplace, are charged unexpected fees for services, experience unfair debt inflation, are physically or sexually abused, and so on. At the other end of the spectrum are migrants who operate with full knowledge and agency and who are not deceived or mistreated by facilitators or employers. Many migrants fall between the two poles. Some do not fully comprehend the terms of their agreement with a facilitator, the specific working conditions or risks in a new locale, or how difficult it can be to pay off a debt. In some scenarios, one's initial consent or knowledge about the kind of work he or she will be doing is diluted by subsequent, unexpected demands or conditions; or the individual "consents" to performing a task that they initially considered distasteful but later define as acceptable because of its

economic benefits—a “very fine line between deception, socialization [by other participants], and normalization” of previously disliked tasks (Molland 2012, 100). Some migrants relocate reluctantly—a diluted form of consent—out of an obligation to support their families or because of tacit pressure from relatives. And, finally, for those who performed the same kind of work at home, living and working conditions at the destination may be far worse than what they previously experienced.

Many of those who migrate are responding to push factors—i.e., the lack of economic opportunities or poor working conditions in their local community—rather than the pull factor of trafficker enticement. For example, Vietnamese migrants working in Cambodian brothels were found to be motivated to migrate by “economic incentives, desire for an independent lifestyle, and dissatisfaction with rural life and agricultural labor” (Busza, Castle, and Diarra 2004, 1370). In Kuala Lumpur, migrant Chinese sex workers “emphasize that it is not just about the income per se, but that the income permits them to be financially independent and free from anyone else’s control. One of their goals is to be able to travel and experience as many global cities as possible”; other motives and goals include using earnings to buy fashionable apparel, remit money to parents back home, pursue education, buy a home, and set up their own business (Chin 2013, 98, 117, 176). Similarly, another study found that for Russian women selling sex in Norway, “The wish to improve the financial status of oneself and one’s family emerged as a central theme in the interviews. . . . The women distanced themselves from the stereotype of the passive victim. . . . They talked about their actions in terms of intentions, choices, and desires” (Jacobsen and Skilbrei 2010, 190). There is sufficient evidence, from a growing body of studies, demonstrating that at least some illegal migrants as well as trafficked persons have more agency than the stereotype and do not experience the kinds of exploitation and abuse meted out to other persons.

Minors as “victims” and facilitators as “traffickers”

Some analysts even question minors’ universalized status as victims and presumed incapacity to consent to labor migration. In this issue of *The ANNALS*, Neil Howard’s ethnographic study of African boys working in mines in a neighboring country uncovered considerable intentionality on their part: their migration and hard work can indeed be experienced negatively, but most viewed labor migration as an opportunity because it was the principle vehicle whereby the youths could earn money to support their families and personally advance in life. Some other research offers similar findings. For example, a study of ninety migrant male minors who sold sex in eighteen European cities concluded: “By selling sex, most interviewees were able to work and earn money, afford independent accommodation, remit to their families at home, take care of themselves, and have fun.” Many of them preferred to sell sex because it was less visible to the authorities than other kinds of work and because it provided them with a type of “social interaction where they are valued and desired” in contrast to other arenas where “they feel undesirable and marginalized” (Mai 2011,

1244–45). These youths would be ipso facto trafficking victims by law, however, due to their status as minors assisted by middlemen.

Although little research has been done on traffickers and other intermediaries (Zhang 2009), we do know that they are not monolithic: “There is no standard profile of traffickers. They range from truck drivers and village ‘aunties’ to labor brokers and police officers. Traffickers are as varied as the circumstances of their victims” (Feingold 2005, 28). Such diversity means that a segment of the “trafficker” population does not fit the folk-devil stereotype. Several studies of migrant women working in prostitution have found that few of them were coercively trafficked and that many recruiters were friends, acquaintances, or family members (e.g., Jacobsen and Skilbrei 2010; Surtees 2008; Vocks and Nijboer 2000). In one recent study, almost all of the individuals who recruited women to work in bars and brothels along the Thai-Laos border were “young women coming from, or being acquainted with, the village community” (Molland 2012, 218).

Other studies similarly challenge the trafficker stereotype or document a spectrum of recruiter types. Interviews with 142 minors who migrated from Latin America to the United States found that most were assisted by family members or friends, not shadowy organized criminals; the youths did not self-identify as victims but instead were “adamant that they wanted to migrate to the United States” to earn money (Gozdziaik 2012, 8). One of the largest syndicates in Kuala Lumpur facilitates immigrant sex workers’ entry into the city and provides them with “clients, personal security, housing, transportation, and banking” for a fee. A unique study of the syndicate that assists these migrant sex workers found that it had “a reputation for treating them well” (Chin 2013, 143, 137, 136). Filipina entertainers working in hostess clubs in Japan are treated quite differently. They are compelled to enter into bonded labor to pay off their debts to brokers who arrange for their travel and employment in Japan. Such peonage involves withholding of passports and wages until the women return to the Philippines; inflation of the debt owed; being forced to sign a blank check or contract that managers can subsequently fill in with expenses; being charged an exorbitant commission; and being overcharged for food and housing (Parreñas 2011, 40–48). Parreñas argues that these conditions do not qualify as trafficking because the women do not experience outright coercion or deception (debatable given the working conditions she describes) and seek out such jobs as a better option than a life of deprivation in the Philippines. But she notes that this labor migration would be more liberating if policies were changed to enhance migrant hostesses’ “freedom from their middleman brokers, improved labor conditions, workplace flexibility, and access to continued migration” (Parreñas 2011, 272).

Chin and Finckenauer (2012) interviewed 149 Chinese women who were assisted in travelling to other countries for the purpose of engaging in the sex trade. The majority of the facilitators were other prostitutes who had returned from abroad and then helped a novice obtain a visa, accompanied her in transit, and/or introduced her to a business owner at the destination. A minority relied on other types of middlemen (boyfriends, male and female pimps, or business representatives). None reported that they had been coerced into sex work; only a few felt unfairly treated; conflicts between workers and their facilitators seldom

occurred; and only one woman experienced violence by a broker. Most displayed a strong sense of agency, seeking out migration opportunities for economic betterment; they were aware of the kind of work awaiting them at the destination. However, 26 percent were financially exploited at work (defined as receiving less than half what a client pays), and 15 percent reported that they were not free to move around or quit the work because their travel documents were being held by their debt holder or employer.

Few researchers have interviewed traffickers themselves. A unique study, based on data from ninety-one individuals incarcerated for trafficking in Cambodia, is featured in *The ANNALS* article by Chenda Keo and his research team. They document, first, crucial variations within this population of convicted traffickers—including their education, marital status, socioeconomic status (the majority were poor), and gender (more than 70 percent were women). Second, based on interviews with the incarcerated traffickers (cross-checked with other sources in some cases), the researchers concluded that only 25 percent of them had clearly been involved in trafficking as defined by Cambodian law; 16 percent had been involved in procuring for prostitution but not trafficking; and 59 percent had been “doubtfully convicted” of trafficking—meaning that the evidence of involvement in trafficking was dubious. The doubtfully convicted may have been engaged in other types of offenses or no offense at all.

Facilitators are examined in two other essays in this volume. These studies explore pimps’ associations with underage prostitutes. Under current American and Canadian laws, individuals who facilitate or benefit from a minor’s involvement in the sex trade—who were previously deemed pimps or procurers—are now defined as “traffickers” and subject to enhanced punishment (a minimum sentence of 10 years’ incarceration in the United States). Using different methods—ethnographic observations and interviews, and content-analysis of phone-tapped conversations—the studies by Anthony Marcus and his research team in New York and Atlantic City and Carlo Morselli and Isa Savoie-Gargiso in Montreal document a continuum of relationships between the minors and their legally defined traffickers. Some of the facilitators fit the conventional exploiter image, but this was not the case for the majority of pimps studied in the three cities. In many of the cases, it was the prostitute who approached the pimp for assistance, rather than the pimp enticing or coercing in the prostitute. And even in those cases where a pimp took the initiative to recruit a prostitute, there was little evidence of deception or coercion. Moreover, in their daily activities, pimps varied in their involvement in decision-making, with some prostitutes exercising control over pimps and assuming a dominant position in the prostitution ring. These two studies complicate the conventional model of pimp-prostitute relations, and it is noteworthy that such variation in roles and power relations were uncovered even in cases when the prostitute had begun work as a minor.

In short, intermediaries and employers vary considerably in their relationships with migrant workers—some having cooperative and mutually beneficial relationships while others are predators who recruit by deception or force at the migration stage or engage in serious physical mistreatment and economic exploitation at the worksite.

Migration vs. trafficking

In-depth studies illuminate other important experiential aspects of migration and trafficking. In Danièle Bélanger's article in this volume, two-thirds of the 646 Vietnamese labor migrants whom she interviewed reported that they had experienced no deception, abuse, or exploitation either in transit or at work. Moreover, 60 percent assessed their experience positively with regard to their work situation (e.g., income earned, benefits to family members, improved housing conditions at home). One-third, however, had experienced at least one serious instance of deception or abuse: reduced wages, threats of being deported, confinement at the workplace, no sick leave, no telephone communication with others, and being prevented from returning to Vietnam. And three-quarters had their passports confiscated by third parties.

Important aspects of migrating to another country for work, including the experiential dimensions of trafficking and forced labor as well as the challenges one faces when returning home, are nicely documented in Denise Brennan's article in this volume. She interviewed women who had migrated from the Dominican Republic to Argentina and subsequently returned home, and their accounts shine a light on the multiple difficulties they experienced both abroad and upon their return home. But this is not the end of the story. Brennan also analyzes how the women's views and experiences often clashed with the way in which they were officially labeled and treated by Dominican and Argentine agencies, whose policies were a result of pressure from the U.S. State Department.

Sheldon Zhang's article in this volume examines 826 Mexican labor immigrants to San Diego County, California. About one-third of the migrants had been victims of trafficking as defined by U.S. law, and around half had been subjected to some form of abuse during employment. Such treatment included deceptive or false representations regarding the nature of work to be performed; assault; confinement; deprivations at the workplace; and unfair labor practices (e.g., withholding wages). The study disaggregates victimization by employment sector and finds that construction, food processing, and janitorial/cleaning work registered the highest rates of abuse during transit and at the work site.

Also in this volume, Munim Joarder and Paul Miller surveyed 386 labor migrants who had returned to their home country of Bangladesh. The study reported substantial rates of deception and abuse: fraudulent travel documents; wages withheld for at least six months; labor contract violated in some way (e.g., wages below contracted amount); and being forced to work long hours without overtime pay. In addition, four-fifths had their passport confiscated (and never returned for half of them), and almost all of the women experienced sexual harassment or assault by a broker or employer.

Sex trafficking during sporting events

For years, activists and the media have predicted that thousands of women will be trafficked into prostitution at the World Cup, the Olympics, and U.S. Super

Bowls (the figures range from 10,000 to 100,000, with several predicting 40,000, as illustrated in a recent documentary, *Don't Shout Too Loud*). A European Parliament resolution was unequivocal: "any major sporting event ... results in a temporary and spectacular increase in the demand for sexual services" (European Parliament 2006, para C), a view echoed by the Council of Europe. The logic is that (1) male visitors constitute a huge sex market because their anonymity (as foreigners) is conducive to activities they would not normally engage in back home and (2) many of them are attending the event without their significant others.

Part of Chandré Gould's article in this volume of *The ANNALS* examines this claim as it relates to the 2010 World Cup games in South Africa. Her conclusions are consistent with those of an IOM (2007) study of the German World Cup and a Global Alliance against Traffic in Women ([GAATW] 2011) study of seven such events, all of which found no evidence of an increase in either demand for sexual services or sex trafficking during any of the games.¹³ In fact, local "sex workers report[ed] being surprised and disappointed at the lack of business during large sporting events" (GAATW 2011, 15). The three studies note that it is not cost-effective for traffickers or pimps to bring prostitutes to a city for such a short-term engagement—the cost of transportation and accommodation outweighs the potential profits. The GAATW study concluded that media and government claims were nothing more than sensationalized rumors whose origins were political. By creating a "moral panic," antiprostitution forces were able to arouse public opinion and catalyze a government crackdown on local prostitution during all seven events. The substantial resources that each city devoted to attacking this alleged problem could have been devoted to other needs.

Conclusion

New research confirms that the lived experiences of human trafficking and migration vary tremendously. They range from highly coercive and exploitative to cooperative, consensual, and mutually beneficial relationships between migrants and their facilitators, with more complex gray areas in between the two poles. Some brokers are relatives, friends, or associates who recruit workers and facilitate migration—individuals who have a very different relationship with migrants than those who use force or deception or engage in serious and systematic abuses.

The empirical studies featured in this volume of *The ANNALS* demonstrate the ways in which migration and trafficking are much more complex and variegated than the image popularized in the dominant discourse. This kind of research is quite challenging, which explains why there are so few high-quality studies to date. It is extremely difficult to gain access to participants in illegal enterprises even after they have left the trade. Many of the articles in this volume, therefore, break new ground in reporting novel findings on victims, facilitators, offenders, and the practices of other actors such as government officials and

celebrities. The accumulation of more studies of this nature will help to address some fundamental questions about the complex dynamics of human trafficking.

The kind of microlevel research that I advocate can be used as a basis for identifying trafficking “hot spots” and then directing resources to prosecute perpetrators and assist victims in such locations. Such research can provide an antidote to top-down, evidence-thin policies and practices, such as the U.S. State Department’s dubious annual ranking of other nations according to their performance in fighting trafficking. For more than a decade, the State Department’s trafficking office has placed countries in three main “tiers” and has used the threat of sanctions to pressure nations that it considers poor performers (in the lowest tier) to reform their laws and enforcement practices. This annual exercise has been criticized by several scholars for being anecdotal and lacking in sufficient data on which to base the rankings, and the same indictment can be made for the European Commission’s recent ranking of twenty-seven European nations and the terribly flawed Global Slavery Index—both discussed above. In all three cases, there is a gross disconnect between the sources and procedures used to create the rankings and what is happening on the ground. High-quality microlevel empirical studies can provide a superior, evidence-based foundation for the development of official policies regarding human trafficking.

Notes

1. According to the United Nations, 134 countries have criminalized trafficking and 28 have not done so (UNODC 2012, 88).

2. Brazilian Penal Code, Article 231, quoted in Blanchette and Silva (2012, 113).

3. The U.S. law is the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA).

4. Bales (2004) defines a slave as someone “enslaved by violence and held against their will for purposes of exploitation” (p. 20). Much of Bales’s book presents “facts” and recounts tales of slavery without documentation. The website for Bales’s organization, Free the Slaves, states unequivocally: “There are 27 million people in slavery today.” Available from <https://www.freetheslaves.net/SSLPage.aspx?pid=348>.

5. A “trafficked” person was operationalized as a person who appeared to the field researcher to be under age 18 or was not permitted to leave a brothel with the researcher (posing as a prospective customer) to go to a hotel. These definitions may artificially inflate Steinfatt’s count of trafficked persons, given that appearance is a subjective measure of age and that inability to leave a brothel with a customer may simply be standard operating procedure (mandating in-house sexual commerce) rather than indicative of coercion (see Molland 2012). Moreover, Steinfatt’s primary data collection was confined to brothels, massage parlors, and karaoke bars. For places not visited by his team, Tourism Department counts (of discos and nightclubs) were used and the number of sex workers in these places was simply imputed from the numbers in venues his team did visit, a highly dubious procedure. The escort sector is entirely missing from the study. Finally, there was a lack of standardization in some of the data gathering: field researchers were not instructed in how to obtain information inside the venue or why it was being sought and were instead told to ask questions naturally, according to their “personal style.”

6. The UN reports that 55,000 trafficking victims worldwide were “detected” by the authorities over a two-year period (August 2010–August 2012), but nowhere in the report is “detected” defined (UNODC 2012, 18).

7. TVPA 2000, §102(b)(8).

8. Steinfatt’s (2011) census of sex workers and trafficked workers in Cambodia shows how even the most carefully conducted national-level studies face obstacles in gathering reliable data.

9. For a very different approach to studying legal prostitution systems, focusing on how they actually operate, see Weitzer (2012).

10. The commission concluded that two per one hundred thousand inhabitants of the European Union (or 0.002 percent) were “identified or presumed” trafficking victims in 2010.

11. The countries were Belarus, Bulgaria, Moldova, Ukraine, and Romania. Respondents were asked whether a close family member had travelled to another country and been (1) “offered a domestic or nursing job, but was locked and forced to work for no pay,” (2) “offered a job at an enterprise, on a construction site, or in agriculture, but was locked and forced to work for no or little pay,” or (3) “offered employment, but the passport was taken away upon arrival to the destination country, and was forced to work in the sex business” (Omar Mahmoud and Trebesch 2010, 178).

12. The international community has spent a huge amount of money in antitrafficking efforts over the past 15 years. From 2001 to 2011, the U.S. government alone spent a reported \$1.12 billion funding international and domestic antitrafficking programs (*Don't Shout Too Loud*, documentary, Changing Directions Productions, 2013). Between FY2005 and FY2010, three government agencies (State, Labor, USAID) allocated \$493 million to support foreign countries' antitrafficking activities, which included assistance to foreign governments, civic organizations, NGOs, and researchers (Wyler 2013, 8, 13).

13. The events were held in Berlin and South Africa (World Cup), Athens and Vancouver (Olympics), and Phoenix, Tampa, and Dallas (Super Bowls).

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