

# FACT OR FICTION: WHAT DO WE REALLY KNOW ABOUT HUMAN TRAFFICKING?

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"64 percent of all the world's statistics are made up right there on the spot

"82.4 percent of people believe 'em whether they're accurate statistics or not"<sup>1</sup>

Statistics form the core of many policies, funding decisions and program designs around human trafficking into forced labor and debt bondage. But are the statistics accurate? How can people decide whether statements such as the following ones are supported by evidence?

"27 million people are enslaved today"<sup>2</sup>

"The international trade, in which millions of women and children are trafficked into prostitution around the world each year is a most vicious slave trade which is increasing at a fast rate."<sup>3</sup>

"Of the estimated 600,000 to 800,000 people trafficked across international borders annually, 80 percent of victims are female, and 50 percent are minors" (U.S. State Dept. 2005, 6).

This Issue Paper looks at several instances in which unreliable claims such as these have driven actions and policies. It evaluates some research, statements and statistics presented by the media, government officials, the UN and other international institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and experts. It goes behind the headlines and raises questions about the actual scope and nature of the problem of human trafficking, as well as the need for reliable evidence. While it may seem irrelevant to spend time "bean counting" when so many people are facing human rights abuses, it is necessary to know the nature and extent of the problem before designing effective laws and programs.

## WHAT IS FICTION AND WHAT IS FACT?

Hype leads to policies that can privilege ideology and moral certainty above reality and experience.

Fictitious data or information often amounts to hype. Hype consists of extravagant or exaggerated claims that are used to draw attention to an issue. It misleads the public and produces bad policy. Hype presents a simplified, exaggerated or skewed view of the world and

<sup>1</sup>Statistician's Blues by New Connection  
<http://www.eighteenminutes.com/Lyrics/StatisticiansBlues.html>

<sup>2</sup>Free the Slaves  
<http://www.freetheslaves.net/Page.aspx?pid=301>;  
Not For Sale Campaign  
<http://www.notforsalecampaign.org/about/slavery>.

For a critical perspective on this claim, see Issue Paper 2 on Slavery, Forced Labor, Debt Bondage and Human Trafficking.

<sup>3</sup>Coalition Against Trafficking in Women – Australia  
<http://mc2.vicnet.net.au/home/catwaust/web/myfiles/nzsub.htm> For a critical perspective on a related claim, see <http://rightswork.org/2011/03/is-human-trafficking-really-the-third-most-profitable-business-for-organized-crime-3/>

supports calls for hard-line or simplistic actions. It can lead to policies that become tools to promote a particular point of view or ideology, rather than to address reality.

Fact, on the other hand, can be indisputable – it is a fact that the earth revolves around the sun. It can also represent the accumulation of objective evidence or experience. Evidence that is based on a sound, verifiable and replicable methodology can be tested, improved and critiqued. It tells a story about an actual, real world situation and it can change over time as the methodology is improved or as situations change. Empirical evidence assists people in understanding a problem and in shaping thoughtful solutions. It is a sound tool for developing policies and promotes actions that change in response to new circumstances or knowledge.

### QUESTIONABLE DATA

In a review of data on human trafficking, the independent U.S. Government Accountability Office found that “[e]xisting estimates of the scale of trafficking at the global level are questionable, and improvements in data collection have not yet been implemented. The accuracy of the [government’s] estimates is in doubt because of methodological weaknesses, gaps in data and numerical discrepancies” (U.S. GAO 2006, 10).

Accuracy is also compromised if a moral, personal or political ideology guides the research. As revealed in an analysis of existing publications on trafficking, researchers found that the “the compiled bibliography on trafficking in persons suggests that the dominant anti-trafficking discourse is not evidence-based but grounded in the construction of particular mythology of trafficking” (Gozdziak and Bump 2008, 9).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in Bangkok carried out an investigation into the source of numerous frequently cited statistics and found conflicting data and little evidence. Its research revealed

that estimates of the numbers of victims ranged from a low of 500,000 to a high of 4 million (UNESCO 2004).

Some people may be willing to accept statements (myths) or statistics of extremely high numbers if they are made by experts or organization like the United Nations. People are also likely to believe that women and children are more vulnerable to trafficking than men because of the media focus on women and children. So, people tend to believe the U.S. State Department when it states, without reliable evidence, that 80 percent of all trafficked persons are female.

### BAD DATA AND IDEAS UNDERMINE EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING

Despite the need for skepticism and caution, many governments, researchers and organizations use other peoples’ data or ‘expert’ ideas without questioning their validity or logic. If bad data or ideas are applied to concrete situations, they waste money on projects that have little or no impact, occupy time over non-existent or inaccurately identified problems and result in bad or ineffective laws.

Good research, on the other hand, describes the methods used to gather data and is careful to remove biases as much as possible. Good research tests ideas and subjects them to rigorous analysis. Good research can be repeated by others to test its accuracy and logic. It can be updated as new information or knowledge becomes available. Finally, it can lead to better programs, policies and laws. Unfortunately, good research is not common in the field of human trafficking as the following examples demonstrate.

### QUESTIONING THE STORIES AND ‘FACTS’: A CLOSER LOOK

One of the fictitious stories that has spread rapidly despite the lack of evidence is a claim that international sports events lead to more trafficking for forced prostitution or just to

more prostitution. The claim seems to have started first in Germany and has now spread around the globe, distorting and wasting government and private resources and time.

The following prostitution/trafficking panic narrative and response is a classic case of 'moral panic.' Stanley Cohen has defined 'moral panic' in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* as a sequence of events where "[a] condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values interests" (Cohen 1972, 9). In situations involving sex work, panics are common and typically caused by wild exaggerations of threats by bad women to the social order.

### 40,000 TRAFFICKED WOMEN?

#### The headlines

A 2006 press release issued by 48 groups and individuals declared that:

*"Germany Rolls Out Welcome Mat for Sex Traffickers and Pimps: Thousands of Women Trafficked for Prostitution During World Cup Games"* (Hughes 2006).

And went on to warn that:

*"An additional 40,000 women, mainly from eastern Europe, are expected to be brought to Germany to meet demand for commercial sex at World Cup games."*

#### The creation of a myth

After the World Cup, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) investigated the origin of the story. It found that the first public mention of a potential trafficking problem may have come from the German Women's Council, which suggested that *30,000 prostitutes* would enter Germany for the World Cup (IOM 2007, 17).

Various newspapers then expanded the claim, suggesting that up to *40,000 forced prostitutes* would enter for the event. "By the time these articles were published, the German Association of Cities and Towns had already disclaimed the figure" (IOM 2007, 17).

#### The reality

The Council of the European Union conducted a study to determine whether there was any truth to these dire predictions and concluded that the crisis "did not materialise" (Council of Europe 2007, 4). IOM also concluded that "the estimate of 40,000 women expected to be trafficked was unfounded and unrealistic" (IOM 2007, 5). In addition, respected anti-trafficking organizations reported that they did not receive any reports of persons trafficked for the World Cup.<sup>4</sup>

#### The harm

The focus of the hysterical rhetoric shifted from concerns about trafficking to fears of an invasion of prostitutes and back again. So it was unclear (in Germany or other countries in a similar panic mode) whether the public was worried that women and girls would be forced into sex work or whether foreign 'prostitutes' would invade the country. The panic revealed a mixture of xenophobic fears of outsiders and desires to preserve cultural purity, both of which can result in anti-immigrant measures or other measures to control sex workers.

- In the days before and during the World Cup, the police in some German states intensified their raids on brothels (IOM 2007, 19). Over 300 online articles in the German media fanned the flames focusing negative attention on sex workers.
- In a misguided attempt to address the purported influx of trafficked women, the European Justice Commissioner reportedly proposed reintroducing visa requirements for all non-European Union citizens travelling to Germany for the World Cup (European Report 2006).

<sup>4</sup> German NGOs reported that "there were no or at least hardly any consultation cases having occurred, which could be directly related to the World Cup" (KOK 2006).

- In the United States, the House of Representatives wasted time and resources to conduct a hearing (U.S. House of Representatives 2006(a)) and to pass a Resolution encouraging Germany to take steps to stop the World Cup trafficking (U.S. House of Representatives 2006(b)).

Perhaps the deepest harm caused by the media-fed panic may be less public concern for the real problem of human trafficking. When the 40,000 victims failed to appear, some people certainly would have felt justified to conclude that trafficking is not a big problem. This could, in turn, lead to less funding and decreased government attention to the problem. However, no research has been done on this question to date.

### The hype and hysteria continue

Unfortunately, the hype and hysteria live on. Despite the proof that hype caused the panic before the German World Cup, people continue make similar claims prior to large sports events, often citing the German World Cup's 40,000 victims.

- South Africa: 40,000 women (ironically, the same number as was predicted in Germany) will be trafficked to the 2010 South Africa World Cup.<sup>5</sup> Research conducted afterward found that the 40,000 women did not materialize (SWEAT 2010). The South African government had wasted precious resources to counter a non-existent problem.
- Canada: A claim of increased demand for prostitution and an increase in trafficking at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics (Future Group 2007) did not materialize (Bagnall 2008).

<sup>5</sup> See e.g., the Christian Science Monitor story <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2010/0512/Prostitutes-flock-to-South-Africa-ahead-of-World-Cup-2010>

- United States: Claims that between “50,000 and 100,000 prostitutes” would arrive for the Super Bowl did not materialize (only 3 out-of-state prostitutes were arrested) (Kotz 2011). Almost 80,000 people petitioned the host committee to stop the “well documented” “trafficking of children for sale at the Super Bowl” (Change.org 2011). Only 2 local minors were arrested (and why did they arrest children instead of offering support is unclear) (Kotz 2011).
- United Kingdom: The fears of huge numbers of sex workers and trafficked women coming to the UK for the 2012 Olympic games have already commenced with salacious headlines like “London 2012 Olympics: vice girls hope to strike gold” (Magnay 2010).

### OTHER EXAMPLES

The following statements are just a few examples of other claims that are made on a regular basis – ones that are not based on any evidence but that have a tremendous appeal, particularly to the media, politicians and advocates. When hearing extreme statements such as these, the response should always be – where is the evidence?

#### Criminalizing clients reduces prostitution and trafficking

The Swedish government claimed in an English language summary of a 2010 report that criminalizing clients, but not sex workers, has reduced prostitution by half and is a “barrier to human traffickers” (Skarhed Summary 2010, 34, 37). However, an unofficial translation of key provisions reveals that the evidence for these conclusions is lacking. Readers who are interested in checking for themselves can download the full report (Skarhed Report 2010) and use online translation tools to check the accuracy of key provisions of the Skarhed Summary conclusions.

#### 30-50,000 ‘sex slaves’ in the U.S.?

In 2004, Peter Landesman published the article “The Girls Next Door: Sex Slaves on Main

Street” in the New York Times Magazine (Landesman 2004). He cites Kevin Bales for the statement that “there are 30,000 to 50,000 sex slaves in captivity in the United States at any given time” but does not say how Bales arrived at this figure.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, Landesman repeats it as fact.

### 25,000 ‘sex slaves’ or 80,000 sex workers in the U.K.?

NGOs, politicians and the media in the United Kingdom proclaimed (without producing evidence) that up to 25,000 “sex slaves” were in need of rescue (Edwards 2005) and that 80,000 women were in sex work (Gupta 2009; Bindel 2008). However, the Operation Pentameter II police raids that looked for the 25,000 sex slaves only located 351 women, all of whom “variously absconded from police, went home voluntarily, declined support, were removed by the UK Borders Agency or were prosecuted for various offences” (Davies 2009). The 80,000 figure was also shown to have no basis in fact (Brooks-Gordon 2009; Butterworth 2008).

### 64.7% increase in online trafficking of minor girls in only six months?

A Women’s Funding Network report presented to Congress by Deborah Richardson claims that, over a six-month period, the number of minor girls who had been trafficked online increased 20.7% in New York, 39.2% in Michigan and 64.7% in Minnesota (Richardson 2010). However, Nick Pinto of the Village Voice newspaper wrote a scathing article in which he chastised his fellow journalists for not investigating before publishing these claims. “None of the media that published Richardson’s astonishing numbers bothered to examine the study at the heart of her claim. If they had, they would have found what we did after asking independent experts to examine the research: It’s junk science” (Pinto 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Jack Shafer of Slate Magazine published a number of critical pieces about Landesman’s report (Shafer 2004(a); Shafer 2004(b); Shafer 2005).

Until the media, politicians, NGOs and researchers take a more critical and skeptical approach to what they hear and read, sensationalist media stories will continue to promote potentially harmful or ineffective panicked responses.

## EXAMPLES OF EVIDENCE-BASED RESEARCH

In order to build accurate pictures of any social issue, researchers must state clearly the methodology they used to develop their conclusions and/or statistics. This information provides readers with information so that they can decide for themselves whether the statements or statistics are valid. It also allows other researchers to test the research, using the same methodology. This section describes the careful steps undertaken by some researchers to document the actual nature and extent of a trafficking and forced labor, and related issues.

Many people claim that it is impossible to know how many people are trafficked or where they are because they are a ‘hidden’ population. However, the following research demonstrates that, with ingenuity and patience, much important information can be gathered.

### The impact of different legal frameworks on sex work

Sociology professor Elizabeth Bernstein spent several years with sex workers in the streets of San Francisco, Amsterdam and Stockholm (Bernstein 2007). Her meticulous scholarship reveals how the implementation of three different legal approaches (criminalization, regulation and criminalization of clients but not sex workers) has had more similar impacts on the lives of sex workers and on the sex sector than many advocates of various viewpoints have alleged. Many of her findings debunk uninformed claims typically based on little more than personal viewpoints, observations or intuitions. Bernstein’s grounded research makes an important contribution to the development of evidence-based laws and policies on sex work and trafficking. While not everyone has the time or interest to engage in this type of long-

term research, all research should at least be carried out in a similarly careful and thoughtful manner and be subjected to the type of criticism and debate to which scholarly research is subjected.

### Worldwide estimates

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has carried out a study in which it uses a replicable methodology called ‘double sampling.’<sup>7</sup> The study data reveals that about 2.45 million people have been trafficked worldwide. This is about 20 percent of all persons held in forced labor worldwide (ILO 2005, 14). The ILO estimates that 56 percent of trafficked persons are women and girls and 44 percent are men and boys. Although not perfect, the ILO research has produced more accurate data than any other research to date. As a result, it should play a significant role in the development of more targeted programs, laws and victim services. Additionally, the research should be replicated at a future time to update the results.

### Cambodia statistics

In 2000, the government estimated there were between 80,000 and 100,000 *commercial sex workers* (Cambodia Ministry of Planning 2000, xi) and in 2001, an NGO estimated that 10,000 to 15,000 children were engaging in prostitution

(NGOCRC 2001). Other reports later claimed that 80,000 to 100,000 people were *sex slaves* (Steinfatt 2003, 2-3). Organizations circulated these numbers widely.

Researcher Thomas Steinfatt sifted through documents dating back almost a decade to locate the provenance of these figures (Steinfatt 2003, 5). He uncovered a trail of errors and changes to earlier statements (for example, how *commercial sex workers* were transformed into *sex slaves*). One mistake was caused by someone hitting the wrong computer key and others caused by people conflating sex work with human trafficking.<sup>8</sup> Steinfatt explained, “NGOs and international organizations often print incorrect numbers ... [T]hese errors appear to be quite unintentional, and may originate in something as simple as a typo. But the error is printed, and others then cite it uncritically as fact” (Steinfatt 2003, 5).

Steinfatt and a research team carried out extensive fieldwork in urban and rural centers to document the real nature and extent of trafficking in the country. Working from actual counts taken inside prostitution venues, they estimated that approximately 2,000 Vietnamese and Khmer women and children were trafficked into the sex sector at the time of the research in 2002 (Steinfatt 2003, 17). This figure points to a serious problem of trafficking, but the scope of the problem is far smaller than the unscientific counts circulated at that time.

### Thai-Cambodia data

The UN Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP) conducted basic and important research at the Thai-Cambodia border (UNIAP 2008). UNIAP staff interviewed people being deported from Thailand at one border crossing in order to determine the number of migrants who had been trafficked, where they came from, how they migrated into Thailand, the type of work they did and where

<sup>7</sup> “[T]he ILO methodology relies on a particular statistical method described as *double sampling* of reported cases of forced labour. This sampling procedure, called “capture–recapture” in the statistical literature, was originally designed for estimating the abundance of wildlife, but is now also being applied to many types of elusive human populations, including numbers of victims of war crimes. In its simplest form, the method consists of drawing two independent lists (capture and recapture), each representing a random sample of the population to be estimated. The number of persons in each of the two lists is then counted, as well as the number of persons found in both lists. The resulting three numbers provide the basis for estimating the size of the target population as a whole” (ILO 2005, 11).

<sup>8</sup> See Issue Paper 4 on human trafficking and the sex sector.

they were worked in Thailand. The resulting data contains important new information about trafficking routes, ‘hot’ spots in Cambodia for recruiting victims, vulnerability factors, and locations of forced labor sites in Thailand. This data can be used to develop new projects in key locations and for the benefit of identified populations.<sup>9</sup>

### Evaluation of the work of the International Organization for Migration (IOM)

Research on the successes and shortcomings of organizational efforts is important for improving outcomes and supporting model projects. A recent evaluation of this major actor in the anti-trafficking field is a significant step towards more accountability and transparency in grant making and program implementation. The researchers in this study developed a clear and replicable design and methodology that can be replicated by other researchers. They carefully collected data and ensured that all of their observations and conclusions were supported by accurate information. As a result, the conclusions and recommendations of the report can be used by the IOM, donors and other organizations for future projects (Berman and Marshall 2010).

### STRATEGIES FOR ASSESSING THE ACCURACY OF DATA

So, how is it possible for the average reader to assess the accuracy of statements and data without carrying out new research? What is the responsibility of individuals to make sure that the ‘facts’ they use for the development of policies, programs or laws are, in fact, true?

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<sup>9</sup> The UNIAP is also trying to encourage better research on data collection in the region and so recently held a contest for proposals with “methods for estimating numbers of trafficking victims in a given geographic area and/or sector.” The results are worth reading and available on the web (UNIAP 2008).

Everyone has a responsibility to ensure that s/he does not contribute to the creation of myths or hysteria or wasteful or bad programs or actions. The following suggestions are some simple guidelines that should help readers to decide whether or not to believe what they hear.

### Examine the definitions used

The first step is to ask: is the subject of the research clearly defined and consistently applied? Research on trafficking often relies upon undefined or contentious terms, which makes the analysis and results unreliable and misleading. For example, people commonly talk about ‘sex trafficking,’ ‘labor trafficking,’ ‘sexual exploitation’ and ‘labor exploitation’. However, these terms are not defined in international law and often not defined in domestic law. So, when they are used in discussions, conferences and reports, the authors have a responsibility to define them.

For example, a UN report - *Trafficking in Persons: Global Patterns* - claims to analyze trafficking for the purposes of “sexual exploitation” (UNODC 2006). However, the report does not contain a definition of ‘sexual exploitation’<sup>10</sup> and so the researchers simply used any information sent by someone claiming knowledge of ‘sexual exploitation’ (UNODC 2006, 64). As a result, the ‘facts’ and conclusions in the report are unreliable and uninformative because of the simple failure to define the basic terminology. It is impossible for a reader to know whether data about ‘sexual exploitation’ means legal prostitution, voluntary but illegal prostitution, forced prostitution or a combination of the three.

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<sup>10</sup> See Issue Paper 1 on the UN Trafficking Protocol for a discussion about the definition of trafficking, including ‘sexual exploitation.’

### Locate the source of the data

Current human trafficking statistics are often based on biased samples or poorly researched ‘guesstimates.’ For example, many studies rely on information about cases prosecuted in a particular area, other studies rely on newspaper articles and other reports rely on information provided by NGOs. These are not comparable data and are heavily biased by the person or institution collecting the information. Data from prosecutions often does not provide enough detail to know whether the issue was trafficking, forced labor or another issue such as smuggling. NGOs may only serve a small percentage of a particular group of trafficking victims and may also mix trafficking with other types of cases. Newspapers are notoriously inaccurate and often confuse smuggling with trafficking or tend to focus on migrant prostitution and call it all ‘trafficking.’

### Examine the research methodology

Next, it is important to review the methodology used to conduct the research. Consider whether or not other researchers could repeat the research to test the results. Explore the question of whether or not the researchers collected enough information from an unbiased sample so that the research is reliable. Did the method of selection of data omit any particular social group and, if so, why?

### Think about what information may be missing

Most organizations focus on trafficking of women and children into prostitution and so are unable to provide any information about men. This situation artificially inflates statistics on the number of trafficked women and children and cases of trafficking into prostitution.<sup>11</sup> It also undercounts or omits cases of trafficking into domestic work, agricultural work, food-processing, in-home

health care, construction work and low-skilled manufacturing. Fortunately, some recent studies have begun to document trafficking in the areas outside of the sex sector. (For example, see, UNIAP 2009; ILO 2005).

Few statistics include information about citizen victims. Most migrant and labor organizations, for example, do not typically think of their clients or target populations as victims of trafficking even though they may actually be domestic victims. In reality, citizens and legal residents in many countries are trafficked. They could be homeless people who are trafficked into farm labor or youth who are trafficked into prostitution. Few researchers contact organizations working with these populations for information about potential trafficking cases.

Also missing from trafficking data could be valuable information about cases that are categorized as ‘forced labor,’ ‘debt bondage’ or ‘slavery’ even though trafficking was involved. ‘Trafficking’ has now viewed by many governments and individuals as a unique problem. Many people call this the ‘silo’ problem in which the ‘trafficking silo’ is separated from the ‘forced labor, debt bondage and slavery silo’ even though people are trafficked (i.e., moved) into forced labor, debt bondage or slavery. So, data is often collected only when something is called ‘trafficking’ and data on the larger problems of forced labor, debt bondage or slavery are ignored.

### Ask whether the data actually supports the conclusion

Data can often indicate several possible conclusions and may require additional background information to clarify the findings. For example, research based on the changing rate of prosecutions of traffickers can support a number of theories. An increasing number of prosecutions could indicate a spike in crime. It could also mean that law enforcement is working harder to locate and prosecute traffickers. On the other hand, decreasing numbers of prosecutions could indicate that

<sup>11</sup>According to the ILO “responses to trafficking need to move beyond the present focus on commercial sexual exploitation” (ILO 2005, 46).



trafficking is occurring less frequently. Or it could be caused by changes in prosecuting priorities, budget constraints or changed tactics by traffickers to evade prosecution. More information is required in order to understand what the rise or decrease actually means.

What these examples suggest is that data may be incomplete or subject to multiple interpretations. Researchers may have their own biases or opinions, which can push them to one conclusion or another. When assessing information about trafficking, it is important to consider how the data was collected and how it was analyzed, to determine whether it supports the findings and recommendations. You should rely upon the research only when you are convinced about its integrity. And, even then, you may decide that the data and analyses are valid but that you have reached different conclusions than those offered by the author.

#### EVIDENCE-BASED DATA AND RESEARCH LEADS TO GOOD POLICY

The only meaningful response to fictitious information is to demand and use empirically

supported research within a human rights framework. After more than 10 years of the anti-trafficking movement spending money with very little oversight or accountability, it is time to abandon sloppy methodology and slippery data. We need to engage in honest fact-finding, even when it leads to evidence that challenges our beliefs about migrants, men, women and children, the role of governments and NGOs and the scope and nature of the phenomenon.

It is also time to insist that rights be placed at the center of all anti-trafficking measures, research and responses in order to ensure that the entire trafficking phenomenon is recognized as a gross violation of numerous human rights. Only a well-grounded understanding of the empirical situation and a rights-based approach to human trafficking can ensure that vulnerable populations and victims are able to realize and exercise their rights and that people are not harmed by ill-devised, often ideologically driven, schemes to save them.

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