

Human Trafficking in Post Disaster Periods: A Gender Sensitive Approach

Maria Said

mps02@mail.aub.edu

Introduction

A disaster is an event that disrupts and threatens people's daily life over a short or long period of time. It includes, but is not restricted to, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tsunamis, and floods. Those events differ in origin as well as in impact. A disaster can have human or natural origins and can lead to human, economic, and/or environmental losses.¹ The UN Palermo Protocol describes human trafficking as the activity of recruiting, transporting, and harboring people by the use of threat, force, coercion, abuse of power, or taking advantage of the vulnerability of people. Usually trafficking is done through five stages: recruitment, removal, transportation, control, and maintenance of debts over the victims. Traffickers target all kind of people but especially women and children as they are considered weaker. Those victims are most commonly exploited for sex, labor, and even organ trading. According to the International Labor Organization traffickers produce an illegal profit of around 150 billion USD, and is considered the third largest illegal global market according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.² In reality, there is a strong relationship between human trafficking and disasters. As I mentioned above, a disaster is a disruptive event, therefore, the chaos resulting from the disaster creates the ideal environment for human trafficking, as vulnerabilities increase after a disaster. In the essay I will be further discussing the link between human trafficking and disaster, especially among women, what makes the governments vulnerable to such activities during post disaster periods, how some governments and organizations in developing and developed countries worked on mitigating the effects of human trafficking after the disasters, and I will display suggestions for the mitigation and response plans to trafficking after disasters.

¹ Ranke, Ulrich. "Natural Disasters: Definitions and Classification." In , 55-182. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015

² Gurung, A., & Clark, A. D. (2018). The perfect storm: The impact of disaster severity on internal human trafficking. *International Area Studies Review*, 21(4), 302–322. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2233865918793386>

Link between women trafficking and disasters

There is clear connection between disasters and vulnerability to trafficking among women. This correlation has many reasons. First, criminal networks are opportunistic, and women are already vulnerable, especially in third world countries, hence, disasters will expose and worsen their vulnerabilities. Additionally, cross border trafficking is one of the most famous ways of trafficking, and natural disasters usually destroy or affect border areas, therefore there will be an absence of regulatory authorities in the destroyed area, which will increase the rate of cross border trafficking, especially if women are the ones obliged to pass by these border areas. Moreover, because women are not given the opportunity to participate in governments and disaster management committees, the government will be too busy dealing with the aftermath of the disaster and will forget about taking measure against trafficking and other problems targeting women. In fact, politicians will be too busy thinking about their political survival and economic security, without paying any attention to women and the vulnerable's needs.

Assessing the disaster mitigation and preparedness in developed and developing countries

Disaster preparedness is considered a public good. They also impact countries disproportionately, therefore, different countries will give the mitigation and response process different importance and will adopt different approaches. When it comes to disaster management, developing countries don't have an economic incentive or any allocated budget to prepare proactively for indirect effects of the disasters. Moreover, third world countries do not invest much in social welfare, hence, they do not have the necessary institutions to help the citizens. Additionally, government of those countries are less inclusive and overlook the importance of protecting the rights of women, children, and minorities, which leads to making those groups even more vulnerable to disaster. Developed countries, on the other hand, care about the welfare of their people and work on protecting the vulnerable among them. In fact, studies has shown that countries with higher income tend to do more inclusive disaster management plans that will protect women and vulnerable groups. Although those countries succeed in protecting their own citizens, their economic

development and economic liberalization make of those countries destinations to transnational trafficking, especially labor exploitation.³

Governments' Response to Trafficking After Disasters

In this part of the essay, I am going to show how each of the governments of the Philippines, USA, and Japan worked on mitigating the human trafficking phenomena after the disasters that occurred in each of those countries. In fact, the Philippines have put in place a “special human trafficking monitoring system in post-disaster” that is set up by the civil society, NGOs, local government units, and others in post disaster areas where the number of potential human trafficking victims is high. In reality, the Philippines’ government was aware that after the disaster, people will have limited means to sustain their families, therefore, frauds and misleading economic opportunities will increase and traffickers will have better chances to lure victims. This has been witnessed after the super typhoon Yolanda, which is one of the most powerful tropical cyclones to ever happen in the Philippines. This storm has led to a high rate of unemployment, displacement, poverty, and decrease of educational opportunities, which are all conditions that create the perfect environment for trafficking. Plan International, a British charity for children organization, noticed an increase in the potential risk of child trafficking in some areas after the typhoon. From there came the initiative of the government to put effort to protect the children and women, which led to the activation of the Inter-Agency Council against Trafficking, and the Council for the Welfare of Children, in order to investigate and write reports about trafficking cases. This event also led the government to raise awareness on human trafficking, and pushed it to conduct investigation on all trafficking cases reported. The government also prosecuted traffickers and groups and networks of trafficking and took them to court. It also encouraged all groups and sectors of the society to actively participate in the fight against child trafficking.⁴

In the USA, a task force was established after the Katerina, a hurricane that devastated the US Gulf Coast in August 2005, which led to the death of more than 1800 people and affected millions of people and half a million of houses. The aftermath of the disaster opened the eye of the government

³ Gurung, A., & Clark, A. D. (2018). The perfect storm: The impact of disaster severity on internal human trafficking. *International Area Studies Review*, 21(4), 302–322. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2233865918793386>

⁴ "Philippines: Creation of Special Human Trafficking Monitoring System in Post-Disaster Areas Pushed." 2014. *Asia News Monitor*, Jan 15. <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.aub.edu.lb/newspapers/philippines-creation-special-human-trafficking/docview/1477222097/se-2?accountid=8555>

on the fact that “race, immigration status, and socioeconomic status impacted a person’s vulnerability to labor exploitation”. This realization led the United States to provide anti-trafficking services. In fact, after the hurricane, there was little governmental oversight and a lot of racial tension which led to the development of two movements: a worker rights movement and an anti-trafficking movement. In fact, studies reported that after the disaster, 47% of worker did not receive their full wages, and 55% of them were not paid for their overtime work. Additionally, contractors took advantage of the confusion of workers after the hurricane to implement complex and confusing chain of contractors and subcontractors in a way that stops the workers to hold their contractors accountable for not paying them. In fact, around 3,750 workers Gulf Coast were potential labor trafficking victims between 2005 and 2010 (after the disaster). In 2006 the US Department of Justice awarded \$450,000 to the Louisiana Commission for Law Enforcement to establish a Human Trafficking Task Force whose job is to stop all kinds of human trafficking especially after disasters to put an end to abuse and exploitation of opportunistic employers. The task force focused on the exploitation of children and on the extreme cases of forced labor. It is important to keep in mind that this movement wouldn’t have taken place, haven’t the disaster happened.⁵

Meanwhile in Japan, the Japan International Cooperation Agency JICA assists south East Asian countries in helping keeping women safe and offers them better futures especially after disasters. In fact, in this area of the world, women and disabled people are more at risk of being affected by natural disasters. For instance, the 2001 Japan earthquake and tsunami, 1000 more women lost their lives than men did. The problem is that in Japan, women, disable, elderly, and other vulnerable people do not participate in the national government and local government’s disaster management plan. JICA started a “Project on Strengthening Multi-Disciplinary Teams (MDT) for Protection of Trafficked Persons” which supports people who had suffered of abuse. This team that aims to protect trafficked people includes “police officers, social workers, shelter staff, NGOs, lawyers, medical personnel, immigration control, prosecutors, and staff of the Thai ministries of Labor and Foreign Affairs”, which technically includes all parts of society. Moreover, it has been common to see more women working in Thailand due to the notable economic development, which increases the risk of them being human trafficking victims especially that countries share long

⁵ McCallum, Leanne. 2020. "Reflections from the Field: Disparate Responses to Labour Exploitation in Post-Katrina Louisiana." *Anti-Trafficking Review* (15): 21-41

borders in the Sub region of Southeast Asia, which is a point vulnerable to trafficking activity. JICA cooperated with the Thai government with a goal to eradicate human trafficking. The project's goal was to protect human trafficking women victims, provide them with medical and economic help, rehabilitate them, and train them to be able to start new lives. What is noticeable is that not only public officials were involved in this project but also social workers who help communicate between the parties. The project also supported the activities of already existing NGOs like the Live our Lives (LOL) local NGO which was created by women trafficking survivors. This NGO provides counseling and reassurance to women trafficking victims and raise awareness through workshops and lectures about this topic. JICA is also working with the Myanmar and Vietnam governments to eradicate cross-border human trafficking activities, whereby it encouraged citizens to share information about human trafficking activities and problems. JICA also cooperated with the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs Sri Lanka and allocate funds that will satisfy the needs of women. ⁶

Gender sensitive mitigation and response plan

Both the governments of Japan and USA failed to adopt a gender sensitive approach for the human trafficking problem. Here are some suggestions to learn from those examples but with a gender considerate approach.

First, there could be an establishment of a monitoring system that is set up by the civil society, NGOs, and local government units. For the process to be more gender sensitive, those civil society entities can be gender related. In fact, nowadays, we have a lot of NGOs that work on preserving the rights of women and minorities like the LGBT community. Therefore, we could include those NGOs in the mitigating process, like in monitoring the activity of human trafficking on women. In fact, gender related NGOs have more contact with women than any other organization, therefore, getting information from women victim of human trafficking will be easier, which will significantly help in monitoring the activity, and hence protect women. The civil society can also help in raising awareness about human trafficking, especially among women, since little information is communicated to them. In fact, those NGOs can have a specialized team of social

⁶ "Japan : A Look at JICAs Work to Support Women Harmed by Disasters and Human Trafficking." 2017.MENA Report (Mar 08). <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.aub.edu.lb/trade-journals/japan-look-at-jicas-work-support-women-harmed/docview/1891035229/se-2?accountid=8555>.

workers (that are women) to eradicate the taboo mindset on human trafficking and normalize talking about it also to be able to better monitor it. That way, the government will be able to better conduct investigation on all trafficking cases reported, and prosecute the traffickers, especially those who take advantage of the socio economic weaknesses of women and vulnerable groups. In the USA there was task force to help laborers, but we should not forget that women tend to work more in the informal sector. Therefore, if formal workers did not receive their full wage, what can we say about women working in unofficial jobs? Additionally, it is easier for the contractor to take advantage of a woman than a man, especially when she is put in a vulnerable situation after a disaster. Therefore, we can establish a task force with women police officers and professionals who know how to talk with women and convince them to speak out against the abuse of their employers in any sector they work in. Finally, Japan already adopted a gender sensitive mitigation approach, but in summary, we can add the following. There could be a creation of a public agency that will protect, support, and rehabilitate women victims of trafficking. This task should be conducted by a team of mental health workers which include women staff to be able to better communicate with the victims. The agency can also work on integrating women in decision making processes as well as making up teams of police officers, social workers, shelter staff, NGOs, lawyers, medical personnel, immigration control, prosecutors that have women among the staff for a better gender sensitive mitigation vision. The agency can also cooperate with other governments to protect women from trafficking in this region of the world, and can also cooperate with the private sector by supporting women related NGOs especially the ones that provide psychological help for victims and raise awareness in society. It can also work with citizens encouraging them to share information about human trafficking activities and problems. Finally, this agency funds public gender related agencies, such as ministries whose goal is to empower women.

More generally, the government can train a team to sensitize women to make timely decisions when they are in danger. The team should also make special efforts to reach women because women are usually too shy to come forward with their issues especially if they include social taboos. The team should also have a women health workers to assist women victims of trafficking in understanding that their feelings are normal reactions to the situation they have been put in and that they have the right to express them. Schools should also include surviving skills courses to girls and boys such as self-defense, or karate in case they were exposed to gender-based violence

from traffickers after a disaster. Finally, the local government could organize trainings and awareness campaigns for the citizens especially for the women.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, governments nowadays might be working on establishing mitigation and response plan, but sometimes they fail to acknowledge that some groups might require more attention than others. Those groups are usually considered the most vulnerable among the vulnerable and include women, especially from poor backgrounds, and other minorities, such as the LGBT community. A problem as serious as human trafficking should not be kept untreated, and the countries should take actions to stop this illegal activities that target women and young girls, ruining their childhoods and their chance to live a normal life. The above toolkit contains suggestions that can help any government to be able to better mitigate and respond to the effects of human trafficking on women after disaster through focusing on three main areas that are protection, prevention, and prosecution.

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