

Poverty and Trafficking of Indigenous Women in Mexico: Some Evidence from Chiapas State

Arun Kumar Acharya* and Manuel R. Barragan Codina

Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, Mexico

The main objective of this paper is to explore, how poverty and economic difficulty in Mexico especially in indigenous communities that causing trafficking in persons especially of women. For the present study forty indigenous trafficked women were interviewed in Tapachula city of Chiapas. Results indicates that trafficking of women in Chiapas especially in indigenous community is connected to poverty, lack of employment opportunities and the agrarian conflicts which occurred in the state. Many women forced into prostitution by their parents, husbands or boyfriends – or as lured by the false promises of employment. They were also trapped into prostitution by the mail-order bride agencies with the promises to find out a husband and a job in USA or in Mexico City or in Monterrey.

Keywords: poverty, indigenous women, forced trafficking, sexual exploitation, Mexico

Introduction

Trafficking of women is a very old phenomenon (Mondol, 1996). In Latin America, trafficking of women began when the Spanish conquerors took women as “*spoils of war*” (Molina, 1995). In Europe, its origins date backs to antiquity, to the Greek and Roman civilizations, but it was also present in the middle ages. Trade in women can be traced back to the outset of colonialization. As early as the 16th century, women slaves from Africa were brought to the Spanish colonies such as Hispaniola (the present day Dominican Republic), not only as workers meant to replace the island’s indigenous population, which had been nearly annihilated, but also to make the sexuality and fertility of these women available to the Spanish colonialist (Boidi, 1997).

An organized network of girl traders existed in the late 19th century. In Latin America, Buenos Aires was the most important point of arrival for European women who were trafficked to Latin America. Throughout history, trafficking of women developed along a number of routes and in various directions; it took place within Latin America and Asia, but also from these continents towards the Arab countries. While not all trafficked women come from the “Third World” and go to the “First World”, trafficking in this direction has taken an upturn over the last two decades (Chiarotti, 2002). Today, the flourishing trade in women involves as sending regions mainly Latin America, Asia, Africa and

Eastern European countries, while Western Europe, Japan and United States act as the major receiving countries (Boidi, 1997).

The trafficking industry has been able to establish itself firmly as a result of favorable international conditions and due to the huge profits involved; consequently, the number of trafficked women has multiplied over the past few decades. The so-called “economic modernization process” imposed by the “First World” has resulted in increasingly strict neoliberal economic policies in Latin America, including structural adjustment, privatization and the shutdown of entire industries. The inevitable consequences are raising unemployment rates and poverty (Molina, 1995). Thus while only a few nations and social classes’ benefits from the international economy, inequality spreads and becomes ever more firmly entrenched. The pressure of adjustment policies bears down on the majority of people, who are poor and marginalized, and women are among those who suffer most. Women are also the ones who bear the main responsibility for their families’ survival. By fostering poverty among women, economic adjustment policies create a major impulse for emigration (Boidi, 1997).

The feminization of poverty is thus directly linked to a feminization of migration. Single mothers and mothers of more than one child (up to 45 per cent in some countries, up to 85 per cent in some Mexican colonies) are pushed out of the labor market; as givers of life and providers of survival, they are the main victims of structural adjustment policies (INSTRAW, 1994). The fact that increasing numbers

*Corresponding author. Email: acharya_77@yahoo.com

of women become migrants is evidence of their quest for new living strategies. In the early 1990s, there were about 50 million international women migrants and 500 million internal women migrants. In 1993, women and children constituted 80 per cent of the 19 million refugees in the world, higher proportion of the world population. Forty eight per cent of international migrants in the early 1990s were female; and the percent of women migrating that is documented in visas has been increasing for all categories, including labor (INSTRAW, 1994).

In general, there is a higher percentage of male international migrants within developing countries while developed countries attract more female than male international migrants. Thus, the economic structures are particularly important as coercive 'push factor' for migration with trafficking of women. Most of these women come from backgrounds that are characterized by poverty, despair and economic pressure – these are the pillars on which trafficking in women rests, and which enable traffickers to exploit the international migration of women (Brussa, 1991).

Today migration with trafficking of women and children is contemporary problem for the poverty stricken country like Mexico, where the women and children are sold in the sex market for the purpose of sexual slavery. Every year nearly 10,000 women from the different states of Mexico trafficked to Mexico City, Cancun and Ciudad Juarez for the purpose of prostitution and approximately 5,000 Mexican women aged 17 to 20 years are trafficked annually to United States, primarily for the sex industry, domestic servitude, agricultural laborer, maid services at motels and hotels (Acharya, 2006). Though many international organizations, as well as the United Nations and the non-government organizations of Mexico have focused on the problem of trafficking in Mexico, evidence shows that the problem is becoming more serious as a violation of

human rights due to the commodification of women. One of the major problem of growing of the trafficking of women is the ongoing economic crisis in Mexico, which is very much affects to the indigenous community. So in this study an attempt has been made to see how the economic difficulty leading the trafficking of women basically in one of the indigenous populated state of Mexico. For the present study the information has been collected from both the primary and secondary sources. The primary information has been obtained during the field work in the state of Chiapas in the year 2003 in southern Mexico, where 40 trafficked women were interviewed in a brothel named "Las Haucas". All the women were identified with help of a key informant and the in-depth interview conducted.

The Socio-Demographic Structure of Chiapas

According to the national census of 2010 (INEGI, 2010), the total population of Chiapas is 4796580 with around 27 percent (1141499) of the population classified as indigenous. This is one of the most indigenous populated state in Mexico. Demographic statistics also show that 77.65 percent of the population is literate against 93.15 at national level, the state's fertility rate is 2.3 against 2.0 for the country as a whole, and that the infant mortality rate in 2010 was 18.8 against 13.2 for the rest of the country. The state's sex ratio data indicates that there are 98 males to every 100 females, which differs slightly from the gender balance evident in the rest of the country (95 per 100 female). Statistics also show that approximately 58.7 percent of the populations in Chiapas are economically engaged, with an 80.6 percent rate for males and just 38.5 percent in the case of females (see table 1).

Table 1. Demographic features of Chiapas with reference to Mexico.

State/Country	Indigenous population			Total population in Chiapas		Total population in Mexico	
Population during the year 2010	1141499			4796580		112336538	
State/Country	Chiapas					Mexico	
Sex	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
Literacy rate in year 2010	83.4	71.9	77.65	94.4	91.9	93.15	
Total Fertility rate in the year 2010	2.3					2.0	
Year	2001	2010		2001	2010		
Infant mortality rate	30.7	18.8		24.0	13.2		
Sex ratio during the year 2010	98					95	
Sex	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
Economically active population in the year 2010	80.6	38.5	58.7	75.1	35.9	54.5	

Chiapas is the southernmost state of Mexico, which shares an international border with Guatemala and internal borders with the states of Tabasco, Veracruz, and Oaxaca. Chiapas has an area of 7.6 million hectares administered by 112 municipalities, which are administrative areas centered on principal towns. This state can be roughly divided into three regional bands running from northwest to southeast across the state: the Soconusco Coast along the Pacific Ocean; the Central Highlands; and the Eastern Lowlands. The Soconusco Coast is dominated by great plantations of cash crops for export and some light industry served by modernizing port facilities. The Central Highlands rise 900 meters from the coast to the fertile lands of the Grijalva River and its tributaries. The Highlands encompass two major urban centers, Tuxtla Gutierrez, the state capital, and San Cristobal, a former seat of colonial power and now a popular tourist destination. Also in the Central Highlands is the municipio of Reforma, with abundant oil and natural gas reserves.

The Eastern Lowlands include the Lacandon Rain forest, which is bounded by the Usumacinta River and Guatemala to the east, the vast deforested area of the Marques de Comillas in the south, and the increasingly populous area of the Canadas at the foot of the highlands. It is in this frontier region between the Highlands and the Eastern Lowlands that people have been most severely affected by environmental scarcities and it is in this region that the *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional* (EZLN) was born. Most of Mexico's southern states are very rich in oil and natural gas, forest and farmland, particularly Chiapas where such resources are extracted by the federal government for use in Mexico's central and northern states. Chiapas produces 5 percent of the nation's oil, 12 percent of its natural gas, 46 percent of its coffee, and 48 percent of its hydroelectric power, yet only a tiny portion of the wealth generated from these resources is returned to the state for the development programs leaving it one of the poorest in Mexico (Howard and Dixon, 1996).

One third of indigenous are *unilingual* speakers of an indigenous language. Spanish is at best a second language, and indigenous cultures and languages cut across state and *municipio* boundaries. The state and *municipio* (municipal) governments try, but often fail, to contain and manage these groups. The largest groups are the Tzeltal, Tzotzil, and Chol (Howard and Dixon, 1996).

Indigenous groups usually speak their first language rather than Spanish. As with most other indigenous peoples, they are generally subsistence farmers who produce their own food on their own small plots of land, on commonly owned plots, or on illegally occupied land. Their monetary income is

derived from several sources, including raising cattle for large ranches in the region, producing small tradable items, working in the tourist industries, engaging in seasonal labor in developing areas of the state, and growing cash crops that are sold to local marketing boards or directly exported.

The *latifundistas* are a relatively small class of landowners that has long controlled vast territories in the state. In the Eastern Lowlands, most of this land is devoted to capital intensive cash crops for export; mainly coffee, cocoa, and citrus fruits. Distinct from but similar to the *latifundistas* are the *rancheros*, a relatively new group that has taken control of huge tracts of land with the encouragement of state subsidies. They are largely responsible for converting forestland into pastures for grazing, particularly around Palenque at the northern edge of the Lacandon. In Chiapas, both groups have withstood federal attempts at political reform and land redistribution and have retained control of state politics.

In the recent year the state has achieved some positive changes in economic and demographic sector. At the same time, it has also seen the persistence of practices, attitudes and behavior that continue to subordinate and oppress women. Perhaps the most telling evidence of women's continuing marginalization and sexual exploitation across the region and beyond. Globalization of the economy also meant globalization of the sexual exploitation of women for example trafficking of women. It is one of the worst and most brazen abuses of human rights. Among the many forms of trafficking, the most visible and wide spread is the trafficking of indigenous women for commercial sexual exploitation in the state. According to our experience it has seen that Chiapas is among the five major states of Mexico, the majority of women are trafficked to Mexico City for the purpose of prostitution, where most of the women are indigenous groups.

Contributing Factors and Effects of Women Trafficking in Chiapas

The primary information has been collected from the "Las Huacas" red-light area of Tapachula city, where 40 trafficked women were interviewed, reflects that most of the trafficked women have poor socio-economic-demographic background. These women are belongs to a nuclear large family. This shows that the changing in the family structure push the family to economic crisis, for which to provide the economic help to the family the women leave their house in search of employment which make her vulnerable

towards the trafficking. In other aspects the family educational background shows that the parents of these women are illiterate or little educated (i.e. having been educated up to primary level). While

with respects to the family income, the main economic source of the family is agriculture followed by domestic and labor work (see table 2).

Table 2. Family socio-eco-demographic background of trafficked women in Chiapas.

Socio-eco-demographic characteristics of the family		Percentage	Number
Type of Family	Nuclear	70.0	28
	Joint	25.0	10
	Extended	5.0	2
	Total	100.0	40
Family size ¹	Small size family	30.0	12
	Medium size family	20.0	8
	Large size family	50.0	20
	Total	100.0	40
Family educational status	Illiterate	77.5	31
	Literate up to primary	15.0	6
	Literate more than primary	7.5	3
	Total	100.0	40
Family's main source of Income	Agriculture	72.5	29
	Labor ²	12.5	5
	Domestic labor	15.0	6
	Total	100.0	40
Family's monthly income ³	Less than \$200	67.5	27
	\$200-\$500	25.0	10
	More than \$500	7.5	3
	Total	100.0	40

While the demographical characteristics of the trafficked women illustrate that most of these women are very young in the age (i.e. less than 20 years old)

having a very little educational background and most of them are unmarried (see table 3).

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of trafficked women in Chiapas.

Demographic characteristics		Percentage	Number
Current Age	Less than 18 years	32.5	13
	18 to 20 years	35.0	14
	21 to 24 years	25.0	10
	25 to 28 years	5.0	2
	More than 28 years	2.5	1
Educational status	Illiterate	30.0	12
	Literate up to primary	57.5	23
	More than primary	12.5	5
Current marital status	Unmarried	77.5	31
	Married	15.0	6
	Divorced	7.5	3

During the interview we have seen that most of the women were stated more than one motive for trafficking. So considering to these aspects we have stated that trafficking of women is a “*multicausal*”

phenomena. From table 4 we can see that out of 40 women 21 were stated that poverty is the first push factor for the trafficking. Chiapas is the only state in Mexico where more than 60 percent populations are

living below the poverty line (see table 4). This result is not surprised because it has also seen that many times to escape from the poverty in the indigenous community like Chamula the parent sell their daughter hoping that she will help economically. There are many communities in the state where there

is no communication, no school and no electricity existed. Also, the women were mention the poverty as their first motive all are belongs to a large family and their main economic source is agriculture and they do not have large agricultural land.

Table 4. Causes of trafficking of women in Chiapas.

Causes	First cause		Second cause	
	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number
Poverty	52.5	21	25.0	10
Unemployment	10.0	4	45.0	18
Displacement	32.5	13	27.5	11
Love affairs	5.0	2	2.5	1

With respects to others motives, four women were mentioned that unemployment is one of their first motive for the trafficking. Because, it has seen that in the tribal zone of Chiapas state still the women do not have economic opportunities, so to get some kind of employment the women moves to the urban areas to find out some work, but after arriving to these places it makes them difficult to get a job because of unfamiliar with the urban environment as well as many of them do not speak Spanish for which reason most of the times they fall on false promises of traffickers.

There were some women who were mention the displacement is one of their first reason for trafficking. In the year 1994 the agrarian conflicts between the indigenous community of this state and government of Mexico displaced 40,000 indigenous people from their places. These internally displaced people leaved their home, lands and now they are living in a appalling conditions. Those who remain on their land cannot cultivate their land for lack of sufficient space to farm or for fear of the paramilitaries. This has led to greater poverty and conflicts, some parents have sold their daughters in hope of a better life. There were also women who also stated others causes for the trafficking like love affairs. It has observed during the interview that some of these women were sold by their boy friend directly into brothel.

Along with the first motive of trafficking there were women who also stated the second causes

behind their trafficking, where most these women were mentioned the unemployment as their first second reason for the trafficking followed by the displacement and poverty. This gives a clear scenario that among these three reasons of trafficking (poverty, unemployment and displacement), the poverty is core factor behind the trafficking and this is directly related to the problem of unemployment and post displacement condition in the Chiapas state, which is causing the trafficking of women basically among the adolescent.

On the other hand, the mode of entering to the profession reflects that our of 40 interviewed women 21 women shows that they were lured by (false) offer of employment on the false promises, while 11 women stated that they were sold directly by their family to escape from the poverty and women were sold by their boy friend and they also fall on the false promise of marriage (see table 5). While during the field work, when we interviewed some traffickers, one of them told:

“it is very easy to trap an indigenous woman compared to a mestizo, first of all they do not speak Spanish and secondly as they suffering from poverty due to lost their land and house in the conflict, they need some employment urgently. So looking at their situation, we promise the parents or husband good employment with shelter for their daughter and wife and provide them with a little money telling them that after their daughter or wife starts work they will send them some money”.

Table 5. Mode of trafficking in Chiapas.

Mode of entering to profession	Percentage	Number
Sold by parent and other family member	27.5	11
False promised of employment	52.5	21
Sold by boy friend and false marriage promises	20	8

The information obtained during the field work shows that the women are not only trafficked to local cities in Chiapas, but are also trafficked to other big urban centers in Mexico such as Mexico City, Cancun, Acapulco, Tijuana, Monterrey and Ciudad Juarez to work as prostitutes, table-dancers and barmaids etc. According to one trafficker, the price a woman can fetch varies from place to place and it also varies according to the appearance of a woman. He mentioned that in cities like Mexico City and Cancun, prices begin at \$2000, whilst for a young woman (less than 18 years old) who speaks Spanish and has a slim figure; the asking price can be upwards of \$4000. Prices are lowest for married women over 25 years old.

Women are trafficked by using various routes. They are never trafficked directly from the place of origin to their final destination. After the deal is made, the trafficker will keep the woman at an intermediary location, providing her with training and explaining how she will have to work or how she must please her customer. Once the training period is over, the trafficker will take her to the different city. If the woman does not agree to work it is typical for her to be subjected to both physical and sexual abuse and sometimes the trafficker will threaten to kill her. In the case of Ciudad Juarez, a city in the northern state of Chihuahua, where more than 500 women have been killed, the evidence suggests that in many cases the women had been trafficked to work in the sex industry before being violated and then murdered.

As it has seen from the above discussion that women are sold directly into sexual slavery by their family, many more are lured into the sex industry with false promises of better jobs and living conditions. Once the pimps or traffickers get success on his tricks he takes out the women from her place to sell in the international and national brothels. Before entering to the profession all the women goes through a temporary training process where the traffickers explain how the woman have to work, how she have to pleased the customers and how she have to negotiate with them. Once the traffickers feels that the women is well trained, he take her to the final destinations, where the girls become a sexual slave with all their privileges suspended, and they are rendered to any possible inhumane treatment. They are frequently raped if they refused to work. There is no way and nowhere to escape. The working conditions of these girls are horrific. The girls are forced to sleep with around 10 clients in a day. They do not have off day, during the menstruation though they do not have sex with clients but they do oral and anal sex.

On the other hand, women who are trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation are suffers sever

health consequences. Most of the time traffickers violate the women's rights to have control over them, and decide freely over matters relating to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, discrimination and violence. They suffer from the many infectious diseases, STDs, injuries from violence, drug, alcohol addictions, depression and other mental health problems as a result of trauma.

Conclusion

From the above analysis it has appeared that trafficking of women connected to the poverty, the lack of opportunities, and the agrarian conflicts in the Chiapas state of Mexico making the indigenous women especially vulnerable for exploitation in this industry. Many women are forced into prostitution by their parents, husbands or boyfriends – or as lured by the false promises of employment. All these are the result of the difficult economic and social conditions in which they find themselves. They are also lured into prostitution, sometimes by mail-order bride agencies that promise to find them a husband or a job in the different city of Mexico. Most of these indigenous women initially victimized by sexual traffickers have little inkling of what awaits them. They generally get a very small percentage of what the customer pays to the pimps or the brothel owner. Once they are caught up in the system there is practically no way out, and they find themselves in a very vulnerable situation. Therefore, the root causes of this problem should be addressed in order to reduce the economic and social inequality and disadvantages, which is provoking the trafficking problem.

Today, trafficking in women and prostitution has developed into a gigantic, highly organized international trade in the exploitation of women. One of its distinguish features is great mobility with in the countries from rural areas to urban areas. Despite international organizations' efforts to combat the trade, the various conventions available lack teeth and this makes it difficult to standardize a national response to the problems and to establish co-operation. Cooperation is one form of action, which is indispensable.

Though many things have been done constitutionally to improve the status of Mexican women, they still remain in a sub-ordinate position in this patriarchal society. The Mexican government is aware of the trafficking of women and girls inside the Mexico as well as to the United States, Europe and some Asian countries but to date have not adopted any steps to combat the problem. A comprehensive approach is essential to address the economic, social, and political aspects of trafficking Mexican women.

Mexico has also provided information and awareness raising campaigns to alert the public to the seriousness of the problem but they need to be involved in establishing joint cooperation efforts on a national and international level to deal with the perpetrators, as well as assist the victim of trafficking. The trafficking of women cuts across social and economic situations and is deeply embedded in cultures around the world, where thousands of women consider this illicit trade a way of life. Although the state government of Chiapas and central government are trying to combat the problem of poverty, but there is no significant result has obtained in the state. This whole issue is now of national importance, one which requires an urgent and concerted response. A comprehensive approach is essential to address the economic, social, political aspects of women trafficking.

Notes

1. Family size divided into three categories; Small family, where 4 persons are living in the house, Medium size family, where 5 to 6 person are living in the family and large size family is where more than 6 persons are living in the house.
2. Labor includes the agricultural labor and Construction labor
3. In Mexico according to the Ministry of labor, the minimum salary of person is 2000 Mexican peso, where one dollar is equal to 12 Mexican pesos.

References

- Acharya, Arun Kumar (2006). *La Esclavitud Humana; El Tráfico de Mujeres en la India y México*. [Human slavery: Trafficking of women in India and Mexico] Ph.D Thesis, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), México.
- Boidi, Cristina (1997). *Trafficking in women*, Publication Series, 4, Federal Minister for Women's Affairs and Consumer Protection, Vienna.
- Brussa, L (1991). *Survey on prostitution, migration and traffic in women: History and current situation*, Eur. Consult Ass.
- Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Geografía (2010). *Población, hogar y Vivienda* [Population, household and housing], Retrieved from <http://www.inegi.org.mx/Sistemas/temasV2/Default.aspx?s=est&c=17484>
- Chiarotti, Susana (2002). *Trata de Mujeres: Conexiones y Desconexiones entre Género, Migración y Derecho Humanos*, [Trafficking of women: Connection and disconnection among Gender, Migration and Human Rights] *Conferencia Hemisférica sobre Migración Internacional: Derechos Humanos y Trata de Personas en las Américas* [Hemispheric Conference on International Migration: Human Rights and Human Trafficking in Americas], CEPAL, Santiago de Chile, November.
- Howard, Philip & Dixon, Thomas Homer (1996). *Environmental scarcity and violent conflict: The case of Chiapas, Mexico, Occasional Paper*, Project on Environment, Population and Security, Washington, D.C. CDHFBC.
- INSTRAW (1994). *The migration of women. Methodological issues in the measurement and analysis of internal and international female migration*, New York: United Nations.
- Mondol. M (1996). *Women's right human right and cross border trafficking in Indian sub-continent*. Report, Stockholm.
- Molina, Fanny Polonia (1995). *El tráfico de mujeres en América Latina*, [Trafficking of women in America] Retrieved from <http://alainet.org/active/1018&lang=es>