

Trafficking in Persons in Argentina

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past five years, the issue of human trafficking in Argentina has gathered public attention, which is to say, it has been a fixed issue on the agendas of state agencies, civil society organizations, and the media. Though this problem has always existed, the numbers of sexually exploited women and children came to light in the 90s, and more recently, there have been frightening accounts that have shaken public opinion, as much in terms of sexual exploitation as in labor exploitation.

Current data is illuminating. It is estimated that in the tri-border region in which Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil meet, at least 3,500 girls and boys suffer from sexual exploitation and, according to a report by the International Labor Organization (ILO), there are 10 cases per day of trafficking in persons that are reported. Ninety percent of the local cases of trafficking are of women enslaved for the purposes of prostitution. The majority of trafficking in Argentina is internal; however, there is also “import” of women from Paraguay, Bolivia, Brazil, and Peru and “export” of women primarily to Europe and the United States. Approximately 10 thousand Dominicans were brought to Argentina between the years 1992 and 2001 to be sexually exploited, and, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 62 percent of Paraguayan women who leave their country as victims of trafficking are in Argentina. There is also a noticeable increase in trafficking of minors for sexual exploitation or “adoption” whose destinations are primarily European countries. At the present time, it is particularly important to point out that there are already hundreds of cases in which local courts are searching for girls who have disappeared in trafficking networks. Many of them have been taken to other countries.

Some state institutions and civil society organizations have begun to investigate this situation in detail and ascertain what forms of legislation might be most suitable for combating it. However, the criminal networks that support trafficking in Argentina are extremely powerful, and many of these women are trapped in established, institutionalized webs. Furthermore, interest and concern from the authorities as well as civil society is very scant. Voices denouncing the situation of these new “disappearances” are still not loud enough.

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION

According to IOM, Argentina is more of a destination country than any of its neighbors, including Brazil, which speaks to the strength of its local criminal networks. There are three or four such networks that operate countrywide, and they have mutual business agreements. Furthermore, there is a second level of more local networks, connected to these larger networks and with international trade connections. The majority of victims of trafficking come from the northern parts of the country, where many women, men, and boys and girls are exploited for their labor. Much of this exploitative labor occurs in underground textile factories concentrated around the city and province of Buenos Aires. The people used at these factories are primarily from Bolivia and Paraguay. Additionally, in the southern parts of the country, there are cases of exploitative labor in fishing companies and electronics factories. Southern Argentina is also a region with a lot of sexual exploitation because in many areas there is a low population of women. The provinces of Misiones, Tucumán and Entre Ríos are the primary providers of women for sexual exploitation. And the areas in which the majority of this sexual exploitation occurs are Córdoba, Mendoza, La Rioja and Tucumán. According to research, the slavery and poor treatment that these women face has reduced their average lifespan to 35 years, only slightly higher than half the average lifespan for Argentinean women overall.

FURTHER RESEARCH IS NECESSARY

Up till now, there has been very little documentation in Argentina on this issue, but we are able to learn about the situation through partial studies conducted. Also, a study put out in 2001 by the Argentinean Commission for Refugees (CAREF), in conjunction with IOM describes the situation of women from the Dominican Republic who apply for assistance through a program that aids the repatriation of trafficking victims. This same study also indicates that most of these women mortgage their houses to pay the fees for an agent to assist in relocation. These fees can be as much as US\$2,000. The loan, or

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accumulated debt, would be paid back upon arrival in Argentina with money obtained in jobs provided. In general, these Dominicans end up mortgaging the homes that their children or parents live in. The conclusions drawn from this study's data have prompted further steps to be taken. The study affirmed the importance of assuring that any further policies would "not re-victimize people who have been subjected trafficking," and maintained that it was essential "to improve the capacities of different related actors (of the public ministries: Military, Police, Justice, Health, Social Services, Defense, Finance, etc.)." It also stated that it is necessary to institutionalize a network of governmental and non-governmental organizations, to coordinate work among different countries, to ask for international cooperation in conducting further research and investigation of the reality of the trafficking situation, and to establish effective intervention mechanisms. Many of these measures have been gradually implemented; however, some of them still remain in their nascent stages. Additionally, there are other studies currently being conducted about this issue, one of which is under the direction of IOM.

THE ACTIVITIES OF DIFFERENT ORGANIZATIONS

Presently, one of the primary roles of international organizations (such as IOM and the Organization of American States (OAS)) is to encourage the interest of different state institutions to ensure that the issue of human trafficking is always on government agendas. In the beginning of 2005, IOM started the Program to Strengthen Institutional Support in the Fight against Trafficking in Persons in Argentina (FOINTRA). In addition to building the capacities of local and national state mechanisms, this program was able to articulate, with some authority, a course of action for establishing effective legislation.

A bill for a trafficking law is presently being discussed in parliament. If passed, it would make trafficking crimes a national offense and increase the penalty for such crimes. The bill points out that these criminal networks are a threat to national security and that Argentina must act in

accordance with the international treaties to which it is a signatory. The bill would also establish an Assistance Program for Victims. Also, the Public Prosecutor's Office, working with the Secretary of Security in the Ministry of the Interior, has conducted large-scale training sessions, mostly for the police.

In 2005 a new network called "No To Trafficking" was established. This network maintains up-to-date information on pressing issues, produces information published in the media, and has involved a large number of provincial actors key in trafficking for prostitution issues. The basic approach of "No To Trafficking" to human trafficking is that it is "the sum of human rights violations," and they stress the fact that this is "the forced disappearance of humans" and a violation of individual freedom. They also denounce "mistreatment, torture, psychological degradation, threats to the family, forced consumption of drugs, and the removal and murder of children born to mothers in captivity," among other human rights violations.

The "No To Trafficking" network has drafted proposals and recommendations for the reform of legislature that protects victims of trafficking and effectively prosecutes these crimes. Basically this reform would entail a) a modification of penal law, b) the creation of an information database that traces quantitative and qualitative data about victims, traders, and clients, c) the establishment of a system to provide aid to victims and ensure the prevention of trafficking, using basic information on demand, particularly for prostitution, and d) the recognition that given how trafficking is presently defined, trafficking in humans is a crime independent of the consent of the victim, and whether there are illicit relations or the trade is transnational.

At the international level, this issue is on the meeting agendas of human rights authorities and the council of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) and associated States. Their working plan for 2006-2007 includes the promotion of public campaigns throughout the region, particularly focusing on time-sensitive or urgent issues in border regions. Prioritized items include the sexual exploitation of children, the trade and sale of children, child labor, and juvenile penal justice. 🗣️

*Translated by Joseph Doyle Hankins.

Editor's note: IMADR's Latin America Base, together with CAREF and Foro de Mujeres de CLAI, held a regional consultation on trafficking in persons in November 2006. We will update you on their activities in future issues.