

1. Executive Summary

Though slavery is thought to have been eradicated in the United States over a century ago, in reality, modern slavery still exists, and the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated forced labor initiatives. According to the International Labor Organization, forced labor refers to an involuntary performance of work which is achieved through coercion and menace. The definition stated in the ILO Forced Labor Convention (1930), stipulates the following three conditions as part of the definitions: work or service, involuntariness, and menace of any penalty. It must be emphasized that forced labor can be perpetuated by private actors, individuals or state authorities; and is present in many economic sectors all around the world (ILO, 2017). Within forced labour practices, sex trafficking and sexual exploitation, have emerged as a growing issue in the past decades.

The United Nations defines sexual exploitation as “any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust for sexual purposes, including but not limited to profiting monetarily, socially, or politically” (ILO 2017). Although all individuals are at risk of sex trafficking, certain populations that are most at risk include, people of color, and migrants (Williamson). Further, *women* are a particularly vulnerable group. In fact, according to the ILO Global Estimates of Modern Slavery, 71% of the people affected by Modern Slavery are women, of which 99% are involved in the commercial sex industry (ILO 2017).

Covid-19 has made economic inequalities that already exist in American society, worse, which has ultimately intensified forced labor efforts. In addition, modern technological advancements have produced social media platforms that have allowed for this increase in

sex-trafficking activity to occur, as there is a more personalized method of targeting potential victims. The following sections address how the pandemic has specifically affected these groups of women in terms of their vulnerability to sex trafficking and sexual exploitation, in conjunction with the usage of internet resources. It will discuss policy options to address these issues and provide solutions in hopes of ending the existence of sex-trafficking one day.

2. Description of Issue

The continued sexualization of women of colors' bodies, which has played out since slavery, encourages the disproportionate numbers of them involved in sex trafficking throughout the United States. Women of color are often stereotyped and narrated as “hyper-sexualized people” who choose and enjoy prostitution, though rarely recognized as *victims* of sex trafficking. This fabricated judgement undermines the fight against human trafficking and weakens efforts to identify and protect victims of sex trafficking. In a two-year review of all suspected human trafficking incidents across the country by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 94% of sex trafficking victims were female, 40% were Black, and 24% were Latinx (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2011). In South Dakota, Native American women represent 40% of sex trafficking victims, even though they only make up 8% of the population (Danielle Ferguson 2016). In addition, the intersecting factors like low socioeconomic status, child welfare involvement, detachment from education, criminal justice involvement, and history of physical/sexual abuse contribute to the increased vulnerability of sex trafficking.

Statistically, women of color face multiple forms of discrimination in terms of economic opportunity and social treatment and are also at greater risk of experiencing sexual and physical abuse as compared to their racial counterparts. Moreover, it is clear through research that those who face vulnerabilities are a greater risk of being trafficked. The sex trafficking industry

specifically draws upon feelings of insecurity associated with the vulnerabilities of those that they target.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made a large impact on the vulnerabilities which women of color face. The unemployment and job-loss problem the pandemic encouraged has increased the vulnerabilities of marginalized female populations in the United States. 61% of Hispanic Americans and 44% of Black Americans said in April 2020 that they or someone in their household had experienced job or wage loss compared with 38% of white Americans (Budiman, Lopez, and Rainie 2020). While 48% of Black Americans and 44% of Hispanic Americans in New York City lost their jobs and are still unemployed because of COVID, compared to the 21% of white Americans (Statista 2020). The May 8 Labor Department report shows that Blacks and Hispanics have the highest unemployment rates in the country, and women have a higher unemployment rate than men (Labor Department 2020). Sex traffickers exploit and manipulate marginalized groups' vulnerabilities. Unemployment issues or problems with paying bills can create economic tension in American households, causing women to be lured into sex trafficking.

Immigrant women have been one of the groups most affected by Covid-19, and one of the biggest factors that has led to an increase in sex trafficking vulnerability is education. Though most of the United States youth population has been negatively impacted by the switch to online learning, immigrants often do not have the same capabilities to handle this change. Another disadvantage immigrants face is a higher vulnerability to job loss during the pandemic. Most people fall into sex trafficking as a means of attempting to make money and provide for themselves or their families. Furthermore, given that women are more vulnerable to job loss than men, female immigrants face significantly higher risks. According to the Organization for

Economic Cooperation and Development, “employers tend to be more selective during slack labor market conditions,” which means employers are more likely to fire or let go of employees who hinder productivity (OECD 2020). A lack of education or work experience are two factors that unfortunately put female immigrants high up on that list.

New technological advancements have aided in the spread of the sex-trafficking industry, specially through the use of Social Media platforms. The Polaris Project reports that from 2015-2017, 845 victims were recruited through the internet. However, there are far more suspected victims being recruited through social media, as reports of sex trafficking only make a small portion of actual cases. It is evident that niche groups/individuals are recruited in distinct ways that correlate to their vulnerabilities. According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline recruitment for sex trafficking consistently occurs on mainstream social media platforms and dating apps such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Tinder, and Grindr. Many struggling teens turn to the internet to find people who can provide stability and support; traffickers know this and tend to seek out and take advantage of these vulnerabilities. Traffickers pursue potential victims by commenting on their posts, sending direct messages, and building their trust through online communication.

Through Facebook and other Social Media sites, recruiters are able to advertise specifically to the individual they are targeting, changing tactics in accordance with the vulnerabilities of that individual. They will further manipulate in the “boyfriend phase” convincing victims of potential romantic interest, promise of gifts, and escape from possible unfortunate situations. Some traffickers use their personal accounts while others will conceal their identity as a model or acting scout looking for talent. For example, “In Polaris’s survivor survey, 26% of participants stated their trafficker exploited them via their own personal social

media accounts.” When first entering sex work, many do it at their own descension. However, this is where social media and the internet has led to control and threats against those who wish to leave the industry. Instances of “revenge porn” or continual stalking of social media accounts leads many who are trying to escape to feel they are unable to without experiences of vengeful activity. 32 percent of these victims reported that their trafficker stalked their social media accounts and would spread lies about them to their other followers in order to gain control. The internet, being so hard to track and monitor, has exacerbated this type of activity. In the Polaris published article, “On-Ramps, Intersections, and Exit Routes”, it states, “One survivor of sex trafficking in a Polaris focus group explained how although her trafficker allowed her access to social media, it was just another tactic to maintain his all-encompassing control over her" (25).

On a legislative side, the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (2018) creates a civil right for prosecution against online platforms that knowingly promote sex trafficking. Further, the Mann Act prohibits use of the internet to solicit prostitution or sex work. It has led to the shutdown of many sites and pages which promote commercial sex service. However, despite these laws being in place, sex trafficking is still an issue on many platforms with social media sites turning a blind eye in the name of providing a platform not managing their users.

As Covid-19 has forced many interactions to shift completely online, many potential victims have turned to social media. Online school and increased hours of online presence have facilitated a new way for traffickers to reach out to potential victims. In March 2020 FBI issued a warning that traffickers are using popular social media and dating apps to recruit victims online. The Polaris Project states, “that trafficking victims are now being forced to participate in remote, web-based sexual activity or pornography and that the marketplace for those activities has

grown” (“Sex Trafficking Is Still Happening – and May Be More Violent Than Ever.”).

Women who cannot afford the rent anymore are being subject to sextortion. During May 2020, Inside Edition investigated the case of an ad posted on Craigslist, where the landlord was looking for "Room share for submissive female who wants to barter session/playtime once per week in lieu of rent we should talk" in Long Island, New York. After the landlord agreed to meet the intruder, he suggested she should wait for him undressed in a hotel room (Vavra).

3. Policy Options to Address the Challenge or Issue

The International Labor Organization adopted the 2014 Forced Labour Protocol to ILO Convention 29 on Forced Labour, 1930 and Recommendation No. 203. Such documents reveal four areas in which the problem can be addressed: prevention, protection, remedies, and enforcement/prosecution (*Ending Forced Labour by 2030*). The biggest area the United States should focus on in the long-term is *prevention*. COVID relief payments that provide for the most vulnerable are the first step toward achieving this goal. Instead of automatically sending out checks to people, there should be an application process that provides fewer people larger sums of money. A recent 2019 ILO report, titled, *Ending Forced Labour by 2030*, points to the fact that poverty makes an individual more vulnerable to exploitation, thus why it is more important than ever to ensure workers, especially informal ones, are included in the payments (36). This will also come back into the economy because of the “fiscal multiplier effect”. This is the economic phenomenon that government payouts lead to an increase in consumer spending, which in turn increases the GDP by a greater margin than was originally invested (Chapter 23).

The other keys to prevention are increased random labor inspections and education. The recent *Trafficking in Persons* report put out by the State Department recommended more inspections on page 523, as these oftentimes are where the eleven indicators of forced labour are

first discovered (“Ending Child Labour, Forced Labour and Human Trafficking in Global Supply Chains” 43). These will help to reduce the exploitation of immigrants and women of color. The random aspect will eliminate any bias, as any statistical application should.

President Biden just passed an executive order dealing with racial inequality. We think that as part of this, companies could be required to go through human trafficking training. This could be a simple one-day training that then has to be recorded to the state government as being completed; a way to ensure accountability.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

While the sex trafficking scenario in the United States is far from being solved, it is important to note that the future has a lot of potential for growth. The Polaris team who operates the National Hotline has been moved remotely since the start of the pandemic. According to an analysis conducted “the number of cases increased by more than 40% in the month following the shelter in place order, while the number of emergency situations more than doubled” (“Human Trafficking During the COVID-19 Pandemic”). In order to account for the new and difficult working environment as well as the increased workload, we suggest increasing the number of Trafficking Hotline staff.

Another round of suggestions addresses social media more directly. The easiest would be to offer ads from anti-trafficking organizations or the National Hotline number, so it will create an opportunity to facilitate direct and secure communication with the hotline, while also providing more education to the general public. Another would be to update the terms of service. Platforms need to make clear not only what they allow, but also specifically state what are the consequences of violating their terms of use. Facebook has already developed a set of Community Standards where “Sexual Exploitation of Adults” and “Child Sexual Exploitation,

Abuse and Nudity” are included in their safety section. Meanwhile, platforms really popular among youngsters like Instagram and Tik Tok do not have human trafficking prevention as part of their Terms of Use.

Works Cited

- “The 2019 Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act: A Topical Summary and Analysis of Four Bills.” *Polaris*, 17 Jan. 2020,
polarisproject.org/resources/tvpra-topical-summary-and-analysis-of-four-bills/.
- “Chapter 23: Aggregate Expenditure and Output in the Short Run.” *Economics*, by R. Glenn Hubbard and Anthony Patrick. O'Brien, Pearson, 2019.
- Davey, Samantha. “Black Women and Girls: Sex Trafficking in the U.S.” *Congressional Black Caucus Foundation*,
www.cbcfinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SexTraffickingReport3.pdf.
- Elflein, John. “COVID-19 New York City Hardships by Race September 2020.” *Statista*, 10 Nov. 2020, www.statista.com/statistics/1185656/new-york-city-covid-hardships-race/.
- “Ending Child Labour, Forced Labour and Human Trafficking in Global Supply Chains.” *Report: Ending Child Labour, Forced Labour and Human Trafficking in Global Supply Chains*, ILO, 12 Nov. 2019,
www.ilo.org/ipec/Informationresources/WCMS_716930/lang--en/index.htm.
- Ending Forced Labour by 2030: A Review of Policies and Programmes*. International Labour, 2019.
- Gould, Elise, and Valerie Wilson. “Black Workers Face Two of the Most Lethal Preexisting Conditions for Coronavirus-Racism and Economic Inequality.” *Economic Policy Institute*, June 1AD, 2020, www.epi.org/publication/black-workers-covid/.

“Human Trafficking During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Polaris*, 11 June 2020,
polarisproject.org/press-releases/human-trafficking-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/.

“Human Trafficking: Modern Enslavement of Immigrant Women in the United States.”
American Civil Liberties Union, ACLU,
www.aclu.org/other/human-trafficking-modern-enslavement-immigrant-women-united-states.

“Joe Biden's Plan to End Violence Against Women: Joe Biden.” *Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign Website*, 11 Oct. 2020, joebiden.com/vawa/.

Jonathan Todres, JD. “COVID-19 and Human Trafficking-the Amplified Impact on Vulnerable Populations.” *JAMA Pediatrics*, American Medical Association, 21 Sept. 2020,
jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2770536.

Lopez, Mark Hugo, et al. “Financial and Health Impacts of COVID-19 Vary Widely by Race and Ethnicity.” *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 3 Sept. 2020,
www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/05/financial-and-health-impacts-of-covid-19-vary-widely-by-race-and-ethnicity/.

“On-Ramps, Intersections, and Exit Routes.” *Polaris*, 23 Jan. 2020,
polarisproject.org/on-ramps-intersections-and-exit-routes/.

“Racial Disparities, COVID-19, and Human Trafficking.” *Polaris*, 29 July 2020,
polarisproject.org/blog/2020/07/racial-disparities-covid-19-and-human-trafficking/.

“Resources.” *Rights4Girls*, Tides Center, 23 June 2020, rights4girls.org/resources/.

“Sex Trafficking Is Still Happening – and May Be More Violent Than Ever.” *Polaris*, 20 Apr. 2020,
polarisproject.org/blog/2020/04/sex-trafficking-is-still-happening-and-may-be-more-violent-than-ever/.

Trafficking in Persons Report 20th Edition. United States Department of State, 2020.

Vavra, Kassidy. “Landlord Busted Offering Free Rent for Sex with 'Submissives' during Pandemic.” *The US Sun*, The US Sun, 1 May 2020,
www.the-sun.com/news/768750/landlord-busted-free-rent-exchange-sex-pandemic-craigslist/.

“What Is the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Immigrants and Their Children?” *OECD*, OECD, 19 Oct. 2020,
www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/what-is-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-immigrants-and-their-children-e7cbb7de/.

Williamson, Celia. “Human Trafficking Prevention Webinar.” *Emancipation Nation Network*, members.emancipationnationnetwork.com/.