

## Global Trafficking Prevalence Data Distorts Efforts to Stop Patterns of Human Trafficking

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### Response to the ATR Debate Proposition: ‘Global Trafficking Prevalence Data Advances the Fight against Trafficking in Persons’

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For everyone engaged in efforts to stop the exploitation and harm associated with human trafficking, it always sounds helpful to know how many people are being exploited in particular places and where they come from. Finding out should help us assess whether efforts to cut down these numbers are effective or not.

However, too many of the attempts to measure prevalence over the past two decades have generated data that is meaningless or misleading. A preoccupation with estimating the total number of victims in a whole country or region (or the world as a whole), rather than in a specific sector of the economy or affecting a specific social group, has meant that the predicament of groups of people who are known to have endured near-slavery for decades is being drowned out. This happens when the prevalence of all forms of exploitation (or all cases of ‘modern slavery’) is estimated at once. Huge inaccuracies creep in when cases of forced marriage are included as well (rather than trafficking for forced marriage), or everyone involved in sex work is counted, rather than focusing on those who are tricked or forced into prostitution to make money for others. The result has been that some patterns of long-term exploitation which it should be a priority to denounce are instead being neglected.

Paraguay is an example that is not known to the world as a hotbed of human trafficking or slavery (albeit a byword for every kind of abuse under the Stroessner dictatorship). Perhaps it should be. The indigenous Enxet in Paraguay’s Chaco region, where the economy is dominated by cattle ranches owned by non-indigenous people of European descent, have been exploited in near-slavery for decades. The Enxet number approximately 16,000, several thousand of whom live on ranches and have been in servitude for many years and still are today.<sup>1</sup> However, readers of the US State Department’s annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report and the *Global Slavery Index* (GSI)<sup>2</sup> in 2016 could be excused for not being aware of this pattern, amidst estimates that 26,800 Paraguayans are in modern slavery. This GSI estimate was based on an assumption that Paraguay had similar characteristics to other countries where 0.404 per cent of the population were reckoned to be in ‘modern slavery’. It made no attempt to differentiate between people exploited for years on end and those exploited for shorter periods. The TIP report noted in 2014 and 2015 that children involved in ranching are ‘vulnerable to trafficking’, but without noting that they were part of entire families in debt bondage. Its 2016 edition contains no reference to this long-term pattern of near-slavery. My concern is that the focus on national prevalence of human trafficking means that an entrenched pattern of exploitation is ignored.

Perhaps the very fact of trying to count everyone who experiences anything called ‘modern slavery’ leads to numbers being inflated inappropriately. A case in point is of Cambodia, a byword for the commercial sexual exploitation of children in the 1980s. In 2001, NGOs in Cambodia estimated that there were ‘10,000—15,000’ children being exploited in this way in Cambodia’s capital.<sup>3</sup> However, detailed research during the subsequent decade suggested the estimate was greatly exaggerated. This resulted in an estimate in 2003 that a total of about 2,000 women and children had been trafficked into Cambodia’s sex industry, which was reduced in 2008 to 1,000 (including 127 children).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, in 2016 the GSI ranked Cambodia in the top 10 worst countries for modern slavery in the world, estimating that ‘1.6 percent of Cambodians [more than a quarter of a million people] are in

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<sup>1</sup> See S W Kidd, ‘Paraguay: The working conditions of the Enxet indigenous people of the Chaco’ in Anti-Slavery International and International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (eds.), *Enslaved Peoples in the 1990s*, Copenhagen, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Walk Free Foundation, *Global Slavery Index 2016*.

<sup>3</sup> ADHOC, Cambodia Human Rights and Development Association, *NGO Statement to the 2001 Consultative Group Meeting on Cambodia*, 2001, quoted in Steinfatt *et al.*, *Measuring the Number of Trafficked Women in Cambodia: 2002*, paper for University of Hawaii-Manoa Conference on the human rights challenge of globalization in Asia-Pacific-US: Trafficking in persons, especially women and children, 13-15 November 2002.

<sup>4</sup> T M Steinfatt and S Baker, *Measuring the Extent of Sex Trafficking in Cambodia—2008*, United Nations Interagency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP), 2011.

some form of modern slavery<sup>5</sup> on the basis of a GSI-commissioned survey in 2015. It did not identify anyone as trafficked into the sex industry, but reckoned that almost a quarter of the total victims (55,800) were in a forced marriage, without specifying if they were in Cambodia or abroad. By 2016, approximately 7,000 Cambodian women were reported to have married men in China, some of whom had been trafficked or forced into marriage.<sup>6</sup> The GSI estimate suggested 48,000 Cambodians were also in forced marriages, raising questions about the criteria used by a survey of 1,000 people for assessing which marriages should be categorised as ‘forced’. Either way, estimating the prevalence of all forms of modern slavery together hides the evidence of improvements in certain sectors.

Compared to Paraguay or Cambodia, Russia is at the opposite end of the spectrum as far as the scale of the territory involved, but estimates of national prevalence have been just as unhelpful—failing to pinpoint who is trafficked or exploited and where they are situated. In 2014, the GSI reportedly commissioned Gallup to survey 2,000 families throughout Russia (though excluding seven regions). On this basis the GSI estimated that more than one million people were in modern slavery in Russia in 2016, out of a total of some 143 million. This compares with an estimate by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2012 that a total of 1.6 million people were in forced labour in all the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and Eastern Europe put together. These compilations are of little use. They confirm that Russia has a problem (which its authorities do not recognise), but this has been widely known for many years and was documented by the ILO in 2005.<sup>7</sup> Subsequent reports have focused on Russia’s construction industry<sup>8</sup> and on the predicament of migrants from Central Asian republics in Greater Moscow (notably public hearings in Moscow in November 2012 on ‘21<sup>st</sup> Century Slavery’ that were available to watch on the internet for several years: Рабство XXI век – Москва-прямой эфир из ОИПФ). These specific reports help understand where cases of slave labour occur and where remedial action is needed. They are consequently much more useful, I contend, than continuing speculation about prevalence at national or regional level.

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<sup>5</sup> Walk Free Foundation, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Estimates to the author by specialist NGOs in Phnom Penh in 2016. A UN report noted that the Cambodian authorities had assisted the repatriation of 21 women from China in 2013, 58 in 2014 and 85 in 2015 (United Nations—Action for Cooperation against Trafficking in Persons, *Human Trafficking Vulnerabilities in Asia: A study on forced marriage between Cambodia and China*, Bangkok, UN-ACT/UNDP, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> E Tyuryukanova, *Forced Labour in the Russian Federation Today. Irregular migration and trafficking in human beings*, International Labour Office, Geneva, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Watch reported in 2013 on the exploitation of migrant workers ahead of Russia’s 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games.