

Editorial: Beyond Terrorism and Sexual Slavery: Dynamics of armed conflicts, trafficking, and forced migration

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Abstract

This Editorial introduces a Special Issue of *Anti-Trafficking Review* on the theme of armed conflicts and their relationships with and impact on human trafficking, forced migration, and exploitation. It provides an overview of the literature on this theme, which has primarily focused on terrorism and sexual slavery. It then outlines the articles in the Special Issue, which expand our understanding of the topic by adding nuances to the experiences of people who flee, or choose to remain in, conflict-affected areas.

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Military dictatorships, civil wars, large-scale organised crime, and even the green militarisation of national parks¹ directly affect the lives and daily routines of millions of civilians. These highly militarised and violent contexts (hereinafter HMVC) lead to forced migration, the recruitment of child soldiers, and various forms of exploitation and violence against civilians. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), in 2022 '108.4 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and events seriously disturbing public order'.²

¹ E Lunstrum, 'Green Militarization: Anti-Poaching Efforts and the Spatial Contours of Kruger National Park', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 104, issue 4, 2014, pp. 816–832, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2014.912545>.

² The UN Refugee Agency, *Global Trends Report 2022*, UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022>.

Armed conflicts (both interstate and intrastate wars) usually generate HMVC that are drivers of large-scale trafficking and forced migration.³ Not only do they lead to precarious migration (e.g. refugees and internally displaced persons), but they also foster situations that can lead to the recruitment of child soldiers, sexual or labour exploitation, abduction for forced combat, and forced and early marriage.⁴ With 56 armed conflicts in the world in 2022,⁵ it was a timely decision to dedicate this special issue of *Anti-Trafficking Review* to the theme of trafficking and precarious migration and labour in the context of armed conflict.

³ The definition of intrastate or internal armed conflicts remains a matter of debate, although a relative academic consensus has been reached. For the purpose of this Editorial, and in recognition of this consensus, an internal armed conflict will be understood as an armed confrontation within a country that meets the following characteristics: 1) There is military action within the state to the extent that one or more illegal armed groups challenge the legitimacy of the government or the state; 2) The antagonists demonstrate effective resistance to the state's war response. In other words, it is not enough for a group to challenge the state if it is immediately destroyed by the state's belligerent response. The opponents must have a sufficient level of organisation to resist and attack the army; 3) At least a thousand conflict-related deaths occur each year. This includes not only combat deaths, but also massacres, extrajudicial deaths, landmine victims, and others. See J D Singer, *Explaining War: Correlates of War Project*, Sage, Beverly Hills, 1979; P Wallensteen and K Axell, 'Conflict Resolution and the End of the Cold War, 1989–93', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 31, issue 3, 1994, pp. 333–349, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343394031003007>; P Wallensteen and M Sollenberg, 'Armed Conflicts, Conflict Termination and Peace Agreements, 1989–96', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 34, issue 3, 1997, pp. 339–358, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343397034003011>; N Sambanis, 'What is Civil War? Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 48, issue 6, 2004, pp. 814–858, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002704269355>.

⁴ Various authors have proposed classifications of types of trafficking in the context of armed conflict. See A McAlpine, M Hossain, and C Zimmerman, 'Sex Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation in Armed Conflict-Affected Settings in Africa, Asia and the Middle East: Systematic Review', *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, vol. 16, 2016, pp. 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12914-016-0107-x>; J Muraszkievicz, T Fenton, and H Watson (eds.), *Human Trafficking in Conflict: Context, Causes and the Military*, Springer, Cham, 2020; S Jespersen, 'Conflict and Migration: From Consensual Movement to Exploitation', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.631>. The latter proposes a typology of forms of exploitation in accordance with levels of control, agency, and exploitation, as well as different perpetrators (p. 3).

⁵ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 2023*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2023.

Despite its relevance and urgency, the relationship between armed conflict and human trafficking has not been studied in depth, partly due to a problem of focus. Indeed, those who have studied the issue have mainly focused on terrorism and cases of sexual slavery. Perhaps this was partly due to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2331 of 2016 that condemned trafficking in the context of armed conflict and put the issue on the international agenda.⁶ However, both the UN and various scholars referred only to a small number of terrorist actors, such as Daesh, Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, or the Lord's Resistance Army, and to a few and very specific forms of exploitation, such as the sale of girls as slaves to fund violent extremist groups. In Jespersen's words, 'Direct involvement in slavery by groups in conflict has become the most common link between conflict and trafficking, and the focus of the UN Security Council resolution'.⁷

Whereas some of the academic literature on the relationship between trafficking and armed conflict has been framed within the narratives of terrorism and sexual slavery,⁸ other research has critiqued this approach. Jespersen, for example, questions the international response to trafficking in the context of war to the extent that it 'has come second to other priorities, such as combatting violent extremism'.⁹ Some researchers have analysed the recruitment of child soldiers in particular from the perspective of their agency and as a form of labour market.¹⁰

⁶ UN Security Council, Resolution 2331 (2016), [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2331\(2016\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2331(2016)).

⁷ Jespersen.

⁸ On a legal approach see A-M De Brouwer, E de Volder, and C Paulussen, 'Prosecuting the Nexus Between Terrorism, Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and Trafficking in Human Beings Before National Legal Mechanisms: Case Studies of Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab', *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, vol. 18, issue 2, 2020, pp. 499–516, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jicj/mqaa014>; S Tiefenbrun, 'Child Soldiers, Slavery and the Trafficking of Children', *Fordham International Law Journal*, vol. 31, issue 2, 2007, pp. 413–486. On illicit trades see L I Shelley, 'Illicit Trade and Terrorism', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2020, pp. 7–20; A Kotecha, 'Human Trafficking, Conflict and Money Flows', in Muraszkievicz, Fenton, and Watson, pp. 61–80; N Avdan and M Omelicheva, 'Human Trafficking-Terrorism Nexus: When Violent Non-State Actors Engage in the Modern-Day Slavery', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 65, issue 9, 2021, pp. 1576–1606, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027211010904>.

⁹ Jespersen.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*; S Valentine, 'Trafficking of Child Soldiers: Expanding the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and Its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict', *New England Journal of International & Comparative Law*, issue 9, 2003, pp. 109–176; A Kidd, 'Unavoidable Exploitation? Conflict, Agency and Human Trafficking', in Muraszkievicz, Fenton and Watson, pp. 43–60; M Hurtado, Á Iranzo Doadad, and W Rodríguez, 'Labor Markets in Contexts of War: Recruitment and Trafficking of Child Soldiers in Colombia', *Colombia Internacional*, vol. 114, 2023, pp. 65–91, <https://doi.org/10.7440/colombiaint114.2023.03>.

Others address specific aspects of the debates surrounding armed conflict and trafficking. For example, Bowersox responds to the assumption that trafficking can prolong and even exacerbate armed conflicts.¹¹ He concludes that ‘while there is no evidence that trafficking can tip the scales of conflict one way or the other, it is likely that trafficking can at the very least sustain a rebel group materially’.¹² From a different perspective, Avdan and Omelicheva ask why some militant organisations engage in trafficking and analyse group behaviour based on organisational characteristics of terrorist and insurgent groups, such as group size, structure, and leadership.¹³

It is important to emphasise that terrorism is only one of several ways of exercising violence and not necessarily the predominant one in most armed conflicts. In fact, under certain conditions, it can be counterproductive.¹⁴ Most armed conflicts are guerrilla wars in which illegal armed groups use a variety of tactics and strategies to gain power; they do not always include terrorism and sexual slavery. Rather than resorting to terrorism, many of these groups seek to gradually build support bases in society (especially in remote rural areas) in order to effectively challenge the sovereignty of the state.¹⁵ It has been widely documented that at the local level, guerrillas often provide a certain order and some services, while also imposing certain rules of coexistence (rudimentary justice, punishing and expelling criminals, sometimes also sanctioning certain behaviours that they consider immoral, such as adultery).¹⁶ Although rebel groups commit all kinds of violent acts against those they consider their enemies, and are often guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity, it is not the case that all of them practice sexual slavery or have this activity as one of their main strategies or main source of funding. In fact, it is far more common that natural resources such as oil, gold, gems, timber, and other lootable goods not only finance conflicts but also

¹¹ Z Bowersox, ‘Does Human Trafficking Extend Conflict Duration?’, *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 5, issue 4, 2019, pp. 267–280, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2018.1486630>. Other authors who argue that trafficking can even exacerbate internal armed conflicts include T Fenton *et al.*, ‘Toward a Better Understanding of Human Security Risks: Developing a Risk Assessment Methodology for Human Trafficking at the Onset, During and After Conflict’, *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 7, issue 3, 2021, pp. 268–290, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2020.1743072>.

¹² Bowersox, p. 267.

¹³ Avdan and Omelicheva.

¹⁴ S N Kalyvas, ‘The Paradox of Terrorism in Civil War’, *Journal of Ethics*, vol. 8, 2004, pp. 97–138, <https://doi.org/10.1023/b:joet.0000012254.69088.41>.

¹⁵ B E O’Neill *et al.* (eds.), *Insurgency in the Modern World*, Routledge, New York, 2019.

¹⁶ M Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, Basic Books, New York, 2015; S N Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Cambridge University Press, 2006; A Arjona, *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War*, Cambridge University Press, 2016.

prolong them under certain conditions.¹⁷ Therefore, it is difficult to generalise that all illegal armed groups in armed conflicts resort to terrorism as well as to human trafficking to finance their respective causes.

Another reason why trafficking has been insufficiently studied in the context of armed conflicts has to do with the dichotomous logic that prevails in studies of human trafficking, in which the agency of the victim disappears. This is the case with approaches that consider only categories such as ‘innocent–guilty’ or ‘forced–voluntary’. This reinforces what Warren calls the ‘violent predator/innocent victim paradigm’,¹⁸ which does not always apply to armed conflict. Some girls and women who have been recruited by illegal armed actors may have experienced victimisation but also empowerment. Some of them may have felt dignified by their struggle or may have been able to solve everyday and crucial problems, such as escaping domestic violence or obtaining protection for themselves and their families in highly violent zones.¹⁹

The complexity of human relationships in contexts of armed conflict and other HMVC is lost when it is fundamentally limited to cases of terrorism and sexual slavery, especially because, as mentioned above, agency becomes erased when scholars imply that there are only innocent, vulnerable, and passive victims

¹⁷ P Collier and A Hoeffler, ‘Greed and Grievance in Civil War’, *Oxford Economic Papers*, vol. 56, issue 4, 2004, pp. 563–595, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oeq/gpf064>; R Snyder, ‘Does Lootable Wealth Breed Disorder? A Political Economy of Extraction Framework’, *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 39, issue 8, 2006, pp. 943–968, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414006288724>; M L Ross, ‘What Do We Know About Natural Resources and Civil War?’, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 41, issue 3, 2004, pp. 337–356, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343304043773>; A Rettberg et al., *Different Resources, Different Conflicts? The Subnational Political Economy of Armed Conflict and Crime in Colombia*, Universidad de los Andes, 2023.

¹⁸ K B Warren, ‘Troubling the Victim/Trafficker Dichotomy in Efforts to Combat Human Trafficking: The Unintended Consequences of Moralizing Labor Migration’, *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*, vol. 19, issue 1, 2012, pp. 105–120, <https://doi.org/10.2979/indjglolegstu.19.1.105>.

¹⁹ R Brett and I Specht, *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, 2004; M Denov and A Ricard-Guay, ‘Girl Soldiers: Towards a Gendered Understanding of Wartime Recruitment, Participation, and Demobilisation’, *Gender & Development*, vol. 21, issue 3, 2013, pp. 473–488, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2013.846605>; M A Drumbl and J C Barrett (eds.), *Research Handbooks on Child Soldiers*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, 2019; N Herrera and D Porch, “‘Like going to a fiesta’—The Role of Female Fighters in Colombia’s FARC-EP”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 19, issue 4, 2008, pp. 609–634, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310802462547>; R Brett, *Girl Soldiers: Challenging the Assumptions*, Quaker United Nations Office, New York, 2002; S McKay and D E Mazurana, *Where Are the Girls? Girls in Fighting Forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique: Their Lives During and After War*, Rights and Democracy, 2004.

subjected to violence by brutal and fearsome perpetrators. In this special issue, the articles by Achilli and Quintero not only recognise and contextualise the agency of recruited children and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the cases of Nigeria and the Philippines, respectively, but also reframe seemingly exclusive relationships that can be closely linked as agency and exploitation, or vulnerability and resistance. At least in the context of armed conflict, these perspectives allow us to understand the trajectories of such populations, which do not necessarily seek to be rescued but rather to achieve empowerment and opportunities.

Not only academics but also some judges and decision-makers have ignored the nuances of trafficking in the context of armed conflict, and this has relevant implications for legal and reintegration processes after the signing of a peace agreement between belligerents. For example, how do transitional justice²⁰ or peacebuilding processes address the situation of those underage ex-combatants who had the double status of victim and perpetrator, or in Weber's words, were complex political perpetrators because they were not necessarily innocent but both victims and perpetrators?²¹ From a transitional justice perspective, could a former combatant boy or girl ask forgiveness from the person they victimised? Even in a reconciliation or reintegration process this scenario can be difficult because the victims are victims and do not ask for forgiveness, even less so when they are children.

At the same time, recognising the agency of victims can pose a threat to human rights defenders seeking to protect victimised people in court. Recognising that victims have made choices, even in adverse and limited contexts, can ultimately call into question their very status as victims. However, in order to achieve reconciliation, reintegration, and healing, children engaged with armed groups need to be recognised not only from the dominant narratives (as faultless passive victims) but also for their resilience, strength, and ability to adapt to different circumstances.²²

²⁰ According to De Greiff, transitional justice refers to 'the set of measures implemented in various countries to deal with the legacies of massive human rights abuses. These measures usually include criminal prosecutions, truth-telling, reparations, and different forms of institutional reforms'. See: P De Greiff, 'Theorizing Transitional Justice', in M S Williams, R Nagy, and J Elster (eds.), *Transitional Justice*, NYU Press, New York, 2012, pp. 31–77, p. 34, <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814794661.003.0002>.

²¹ S Weber, 'Defying the Victim-Perpetrator Binary: Female Ex-combatants in Colombia and Guatemala as Complex Political Perpetrators', *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, vol. 15, issue 2, 2021, pp. 264–283, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijab006>; E K Baines, 'Complex Political Perpetrators: Reflections on Dominic Ongwen', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 47, issue 2, 2009, pp. 163–191, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X09003796>.

²² Drumbl and Barret.

This Special Issue

The seven articles in this special issue seek to make visible the dynamics of trafficking, exploitation, and precarious migration in the context of armed conflict and HMVC. The aim is to present a dialogue with more local and everyday realities in war contexts. Although these articles, mostly ethnographic, may not be generalisable to all conflict contexts, they help to understand the ways in which civilians survive and coexist with certain realities of armed conflict or HMVC. These efforts undoubtedly contribute to improving the quality and depth of available evidence so that it can better inform decision-making and aid quantitative efforts, which are also very important.

In the opening article, **Luigi Achilli** approaches the relationship between agency and exploitation in the context of armed conflict beyond the dichotomy of victim–perpetrator, forced–voluntary. Drawing on ethnographic work in Nigeria with young ex-combatants who were recruited as children by Boko Haram, he demonstrates that agency and exploitation are not mutually exclusive but can co-exist in these young people’s experiences; exploitation has harsh consequences, but it can also help them protect their families or achieve social status. The author emphasises that recognising this complexity has direct implications for the children’s reintegration and healing processes in communities.

Similarly, **Romeo Joe Quintero** highlights the agency of IDPs in the context of the 2013 Zamboanga City siege in the Philippines. He shows the trajectories of displacement that women and gender-diverse individuals enact and the agency they exercise as they flee conflict, find refuge, and return or rebuild their lives elsewhere. From a post-structuralist perspective, Quintero proposes that an individual’s agency is influenced by a variety of structural factors, support networks, and access to information, among others. Displacement is therefore not a linear process that ends with leaving a place of origin and arriving at a place of destination, but rather is fragmented and has multiple outcomes.

Next, **Jonathan Mendel and Kiril Sharapov** critique the depoliticisation of anti-trafficking initiatives, which focus on law enforcement, rescue, and awareness-raising, instead of on addressing deeper issues such as the normalised exploitation of migrants and workers. Using a multi-method approach, their article analyses why, contrary to expectations, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine did not lead to increased trafficking of Ukrainians in the European Union. Thanks to a rights-based approach, such as access to travel, work, and social security, which is not usually applied to other populations in similar situations, the vulnerability of Ukrainians to trafficking has been reduced. Ukrainian migrants and workers within Ukraine and in Europe *are* vulnerable to exploitation but this is not even on anti-trafficking stakeholders’ agenda because this exploitation has been normalised within capitalism. The authors call for political actions supporting

migrants' rights, workers' rights, and access to welfare that attack these normalised forms of exploitation.

Daniel Ogunniyi then highlights the complex governance of human trafficking in contexts of armed conflict, such as those in various areas of the Sahel. He points out that in many cases, non-state armed groups (NSAGs) exercise significant territorial control but, unlike states, are not bound by international law to follow and respect certain rules of warfare. Therefore, it is unclear to what extent NSAGs are responsible for cases of human trafficking. Based on doctrinal methodology, his article argues that customary international law could provide a framework to hold NSAGs accountable and makes a case for the adoption of an anti-trafficking 'Deed of Commitment'.

Juliana Vanessa Maldonado Macedo and Luz del Carmen Jiménez Portilla analyse the case of Mexico, which, while not technically in an internal armed conflict, is in the grips of extreme violence. Although drug trafficking groups have generated forced migration, child recruitment, and sexual violence, they are not the only ones to blame. State policies following the narrative of the government's war on drugs have often worsened victims' conditions. This is the case of Victoria, a trans woman who was victimised by members of a drug cartel. Although she was deeply affected by the abuse and exploitation she experienced, her case remained invisible to the authorities. The authors argue that this stems from Mexico's 'anti-trafficking apparatus' which ignores victims who are not cisgender women and who are exploited in settings other than the sex industry.

Carlos Alfonso Laverde Rodriguez analyses the dynamics of sex work in the context of the Colombian armed conflict. Based on interviews with unionised sex workers, he finds that sex work in conflict zones not only involves risks and human rights violations but also opportunities for greater profits in mixed security conditions—sometimes very risky, sometimes relatively safe. He concludes that the sex trade functions as a labour market that moves in and out of areas of armed conflict and that there are clear similarities between sex work in times of war and peace.

The issue ends with a short article by **Eloise Savill and Suzanne Hoff** who argue that businesses have a responsibility to protect conflict-displaced workers from labour exploitation and human trafficking. Based on consultations with 15 European civil society organisations, the authors outline the steps that businesses can take to prevent and remedy exploitation in their operations and value chains in countries of origin and destination for conflict-displaced people.

Conclusion

Despite some progress, trafficking and precarious migration in the context of armed conflicts remain an under-researched topic. While most scholarship has focused on terrorism and sexual slavery, the articles in this Special Issue highlight other dimensions and dynamics. One key conclusion is the need to recognise that the populations living and surviving in the context of armed conflicts are heterogeneous and do not necessarily fit into the category of victims represented by dominant discourses. Members of these populations also make decisions, undertake migration projects, join illegal armed groups, or become part of the sex trade or other labour markets that function in these conflicts.

This issue also hopes to draw the attention of decision-makers, justice officials, and civil society, both national and international, to other HMVC that are not technically armed conflicts but reproduce their dynamics of forced displacement and the recruitment of children. This is the case of the war against organised crime, where the prospects are bleak, especially for the young people recruited, to the extent that a negotiation process is not possible, since negotiating with terrorists or organised crime is unacceptable. What awaits these young people who joined a drug cartel as a child but came of age as part of an illegal group (e.g. in Latin America, such as maras in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras or drug cartels in Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil)? At best, a submission to justice, where there is no transitional justice or peacebuilding. Although they might have experienced cases of trafficking or exploitation, this population will be primarily criminalised by the courts and society, not only because they were active members of organised crime groups and committed grave crimes, but also because they were not subject to international humanitarian law because they are not situated in contexts of armed conflict.

As some of the articles in this issue argue, these individuals were both victims and perpetrators; but beyond that, they made decisions and exercised agency in the midst of the HMVC to cope with daily life. If the young ex-combatants or members of organised crime groups do not find alternatives to integrate or reconcile with society, they will continue to choose between bad and worse options. It is likely that a dissident ex-guerrilla group, an extremist religious group, or a drug cartel would become a viable alternative for resolving the struggles of daily life. As long as the relationship between human trafficking and precarious migration in the context of armed conflict and other types of HMVC remains limited to terrorism and sexual slavery, these issues will never be addressed or integrated into the international agenda.

More broadly, it must be emphasised that armed conflicts and other HMVC threaten people's lives and livelihoods and lead to widespread disruption of the social order and states' ability to provide for their residents. In this context, trafficking, smuggling, exploitation, and forced migration are logical outcomes and cannot be efficiently addressed as long as the conflicts continue. The international community must do all it can to prevent and end all conflicts and ensure just and peaceful societies. At the same time, the people fleeing conflicts must be afforded ample opportunities to reach safety, as well as social protections and labour rights in the places where they settle.

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