

# TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN<sup>1</sup> IN THE LATIN – AMERICAN REGION.

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## 1. The problem

Trafficking in women is not a new phenomenon in the LA region. At the end of the 19th century, the trafficking of European women (“trata de blancas”) for the purpose of sexual exploitation became frequent. The accelerated trend was related to the feminization of migration inside Europe, as well as from Europe to other destinations, like Asia, America and Africa. For example, between 1860 and 1901, 75% of the registered sex workers in Buenos Aires, came from European countries and Russia (Guy, 1994)<sup>4</sup>. Most of them came from rural areas. There is evidence that America has an abundant (and under recorded) history around this topic. After the First World War, the League of Nations started a three year investigation focused on trafficking in women around the world. The conclusion of this investigation was that “Latin America is the market of trafficking in the world...”<sup>5</sup>.

Mainly, the cases investigated showed the exploitation of vulnerable and poor women, through tricky and restrictive machinery. The intensification of this phenomenon strengthened the voices that promoted the penalization of prostitution from a moral perspective that ignored women’s conditions or their own desire to practice prostitution.

After decades of the minimization of this problem, the trafficking in women for sexual exploitation has worsened in almost every region of the world since the 1980’s, in conjunction with the strengthened dynamic of globalization. Certainly, many other factors contributed to this phenomenon. Poverty, social and military conflicts, and political instability are a few, all grounded in gender subordination that provokes discrimination and disregards women and children’s rights. Still, the role of neoliberalism and economic globalization have played in the acceleration of Latin American traffic in women – and worldwide – appears increasingly dominant. Structural adjustment policies in Latin America have effectively debilitated whatever democracy had existed prior, subjugating the power of governments and civil society to the “invisible hand” of the market. Inversely, the debilitation of democracy and political participation has permitted the operation of neoliberal policy unchecked. The result has been widespread incapacitation of regulatory frameworks, which facilitate illicit activity in general, and particularly the traffic of women (Sanchís, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> In this case, the word “women” covers all female ages (adults, teenagers and also little girls).

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<sup>4</sup> Guy, 1994 in “La trata de personas en Paraguay. Diagnóstico exploratorio sobre el tráfico y/o trata de personas con fines de explotación sexual”, 2005

<sup>5</sup> H. Wilson Harris, *Human Merchandise: A Study of the International Traffic in Women* 187 (1928), quoted in CIM, OEA, 2002.

The role of globalization in worsening the worldwide traffic in women is well-established. A document from the Interamerican Women's Commission of the Organization of American States (CIM 2002) states that "the arrival of globalization has aggravated the problem, building what are named as market opportunities for traffickers of human beings and for those who exploit them. The liberalization of countries' borders and the flexibilization of people's movement through borders, have increased the opportunities for illegal migration, and, when this illegal smuggling of human beings through borders is connected with their sale for sexual exploitation, the activity becomes significantly more income producing. The trafficking of people is an international delinquent activity that occupies the third position, for the profits it generates, behind narcotics trafficking and weapons commerce".

The same report (CIM, 2002) shows that "many experts have linked market liberalization, through the structural adjustment strategies of the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank, with the erosion of human rights guarantees." Globalization has been implicated as a factor that contributes to the trafficking of people as well. In 2001, the General Secretary of the UN, required information about globalization and its effects on the exercise of Human Rights in member countries. This requirement included a question about the perception of the relationship, if there is a relationship, between "the process of globalization and the negative aspects caused by international commerce, such as trafficking of people, weapons, and the increase in international crimes".

Thus, economic globalization, the liberalization of the market and financial flows, and the growth of communication technologies, have created conditions that propitiate a greater fluidity of organized crime through countries' borders. It is therefore necessary to look for the connections between trafficking in women and mainstream macroeconomic policies, as well as the particular mode in which the actual globalization is being shaped.

All these factors create a complex phenomenon that integrates different types of roots, and mandates a multidisciplinary analysis.

Despite the importance of this phenomenon in the region, the IMO recognizes the lack of analysis and data on these issues in Latin America, in comparison with other regions<sup>6</sup>. Also lacking are data on other forms of traffic, which have similarly accelerated in the region with the help of structural adjustment policies and neoliberalism on whole. While this paper focuses on the issue of women's traffic for the purpose of sexual exploitation, it should be noted that, in growing numbers, people in the region are trafficked and forced to work in conditions of slavery. Though traffic for other purposes will not be addressed in this paper, many parallels probably exist between these phenomena.

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<sup>6</sup> One response to the lack of information was the study assigned by the International Human Rights L (IHRL) , DePaul University and the Organization of the American States in nine Latin American countries, between 2000-2002, with the purpose of evaluating the existence of sexual trafficking in Latin America and the Caribbean, investigating policies and programs existing in response to the problem and identifying local and regional necessities in order to formulate effective strategies to struggle against this crime.

The aims of this paper, then are to address some questions on the relationship between trafficking in women and neoliberal globalization, by analyzing the Latin American situation, with a focus on MERCOSUR, and also offers research and advocacy recommendations. One additional aim is to bring visibility to a problem that in Latin America has been silenced and for which there is a lower level of information and fewer case studies, little social consciousness, and that is even naturalized in some poor and rural regions (Meléndez y Mallqui, ).