

# Invisible Chains: Unmasking Human Trafficking in Central America.

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**H**uman trafficking is a crime that deprives millions of people of their dignity and freedom.

An unknown man forces a young woman into a room and gags her with a black scarf. In a store, a boy works tirelessly lifting boxes and cleaning furniture, barely having a moment to "escape" and peek out of a window onto the street. A grieving mother remembers with anguish her daughter, who left in the hope of getting a better job, taking her baby with her. The stories of Adriana, Luis, and Maritza have one element in common: they are all Central American migrants and victims of human trafficking. Their experiences have been recorded in the documentary "3 Years, 2 Days and 1 Exit", the first documentary on human trafficking made by the Institute for Strategic Studies and Public Policy (IEEPP).

Ten years ago, at IEEPP, we opened the first research program on human trafficking in Central America after noticing how little academic attention this topic received in the region.

The work, directed by Arielka Juárez and with photographic direction by Gabriel Serra, a young Nicaraguan nominated for an Oscar in 2014, presents three real stories that analyze three different modalities of human trafficking. When we made that documentary at IEEPP almost ten years ago, our main concern was to expose the forms of human trafficking that received less attention in Central America because they were somewhat normalized practices, such as labor and sexual exploitation. We focused on human trafficking from Nicaragua to Costa Rica. The painful part of all this is that very few things have changed in ten years. These three stories could refer to cases of women from Chiapas, or children from Honduras or El Salvador trafficked to the United States.

There are, however, aspects of human trafficking that have become more sophisticated in recent years. For example, the use of social media to recruit potential victims. Traffickers used to operate as small, well-structured organized crime units, but the emergence of social networks has exponentially multiplied the number of traffickers and diversified the trafficking modalities. The old modalities are still in place, operating in close collaboration with other types of crime, such as drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and various forms of sexual exploitation. But alongside these classic modalities, individual traffickers or trafficking mechanisms emerge, such as employers, modeling agencies, and even groups posing as human rights defenders or representatives of migrants' interests.

Another significant finding is that there are vast networks of human trafficking within each country, that is, not only does human trafficking need to be transnational, but it also occurs within the same countries. In the case of countries such as Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, a widely used form of human trafficking is the labor exploitation of minors. Human trafficking at the national level is a transnational crime phenomenon. However, when looking at official statistics, the number of formally documented cases in each country does not even reach 2% at best of the actual dimension of the problem.



To give an example, in the case of Nicaragua, we managed to document more than 300 cases of human trafficking in a sampling of municipalities on the Nicaraguan Caribbean coast in 2017, when in that year, in the entire country, only three cases had been registered at the judicial level.

However, it is undeniable that the most sinister form of human trafficking due to the victims' vulnerability is transnational human trafficking. This means that the illicit trafficking of people for any type of exploitation occurs between countries. Unlike internal human trafficking, when this type of crime is executed transnationally, the victim is not only exploited but is also removed from their national environment, typically losing their legal documentation such as passports. Additionally, they do not have the language skills or access to any form of reporting because they fear deportation.

With tens of thousands of people migrating irregularly every month, it is unsurprising that some of this migration leads to exploitation. As soon as migrants leave their homeland with the intention of moving undetected, they enter a shadowy world. They place their lives in the hands of strangers who break the law, and many pay dearly for this decision. Women are particularly vulnerable; irregular migrant women account for approximately 20% of the migrant group.

Most Central American trafficking victims detected in the region have been trafficked for sexual exploitation, but it is unclear whether this represents the largest group of victims. Local laws may expressly prohibit sexual exploitation but be vague about other forms of labor. It may be that investigators prioritize the search for victims of sexual exploitation or that they are simply more visible.

To offer sexual services, traffickers need some form of public presence, either in a red-light district or through some form of advertising. Clients concerned about what they see may feel compelled to report abuses to the authorities. On the other hand, owners of sweatshops or labor camps can conduct their operations anonymously and are, therefore, more likely to avoid exposure.

Labor trafficking does occur, but these cases represent less than 10% of the victims detected in the region, so little is known about these markets. Trafficking of Central American men and women into agricultural labor in Mexico is more common, but sex trafficking near the border is also widespread.

According to the Trafficking in Persons Report 2022 prepared by UNODC, 71% of victims detected in Central America and the Caribbean are victims of sexual exploitation, and 21% are victims of forced labor. In the same region, most detected victims of sexual exploitation are women (34%) and girls (55%).

Another concerning pattern is the direct correlation between human rights violations within countries and the level of vulnerability that these victims face in falling into the hands of human traffickers in Mexico or at the US border. For instance, in the specific case of Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, there is overwhelming empirical evidence to support this.

Victims of human trafficking in these countries disproportionately represent population groups fleeing persecution in their countries for various reasons. For example, out of five cases involving Nicaraguan migrants kidnapped by gangs in Mexico during their journey to the United States last year, four of them had previously been victims of political persecution in Nicaragua. This is just a small example that illustrates how these victims endure a double trauma: they flee their countries, often in an attempt to save their lives, only to fall prey to traffickers.

Historically, migratory movements in Central America have been driven by armed and political conflicts, and human rights violations. Today, most waves of migration in Central America are related to political violence, increasing security threats, and scarcity of labor opportunities. In the case of Nicaragua, since 2018, a new migratory wave has emerged caused by the repression of Daniel Ortega's regime, which has forced almost 15% of the population into exile. Countries like Nicaragua belong to the Tier 3 group: "Tier 3 countries governments do not fully comply with the minimum standards of the TVPA and are not making significant efforts to do so."

Human trafficking is a modality of organized crime closely related to the phenomena of irregular migration. Recognizing this reality, in 1993, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala signed the 'Managua Agreement', CA-4. This agreement underscores the importance of expanding and consolidating economic cooperation to improve living conditions in the region. Originally economic, over time, the CA-4 has evolved into a regional migration policy, allowing the free movement of citizens of the member countries without the need for visas.

Although human trafficking, migrant smuggling, and migration are distinct concepts, in practice, they are interconnected. Migration may be legal or illegal, and people may migrate voluntarily or be forced by survival circumstances. If migration is unlawful, it is likely to involve smugglers facilitating illegal entry into a country in exchange for money. If legal, the migrant may be deceived and exploited, losing their freedom.

Despite the formality of this agreements in Central America, human trafficking is one of the most severe violations in the region. The lack of data on victims indicates that countries have done little to address this problem regarding prevention, reporting, care, and restitution of rights.

Since the adoption of the 'Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children' in 2000, it took three to four years for countries in the region to ratify it. In addition, the seven years following the ratification of the CA-4 saw an increase in cases of human trafficking and smuggling of migrants.

Economic growth and trade agreements in Central America do not guarantee a decrease in irregular migration. It is essential to transform structural conditions in the countries of origin and destination and reduce economic and social inequalities to reduce migration flow. The fight against migration-related crimes, such as human trafficking, requires judicial guarantees for victims, sanctions for those responsible, comprehensive assistance, and accurate data that make the problem visible.



The most crucial public policy is transnational coordination among authorities in Central America, Mexico, and the United States, with a victim-centered approach. However, achieving this coordination can be challenging when these very victims are fleeing their home countries for various reasons.

Central American countries should prioritize their domestic migration realities within the framework of international agreements, given that international migration involves domestic policy issues such as health, education, residency status, citizen security, citizenship, law enforcement, and foreign relations.

Despite government compliance with minimum standards, in some cases, survivors continued to be arrested for the illegal acts traffickers forced them to commit, and some victim-witnesses did not receive the necessary protections during their cases. There was a continued lack of progress in comprehensively addressing labor trafficking in the United States, including efforts to identify victims, provide them with specialized services, and hold labor traffickers, including contractors and recruiters, accountable.

The government continued to fail to require human trafficking screening for all adult aliens in immigration detention or custody. It failed to assess indicators of human trafficking among those who were deported. Advocates continued to report concerns that survivors of human trafficking were being held in immigration detention centers and that the government's policy of returning specific individuals from the Western Hemisphere to Mexico while their U.S. deportation proceedings were pending increased their vulnerability to human trafficking.

In closing, let us remember that human trafficking is not only a crime but an affront to our humanity. "Every life count, every dream matters" - these words must resonate in our actions and policies. We cannot remain indifferent as the lives of Adriana, Luis, Maritza, and so many others are torn apart by this scourge. Indifference is human trafficking's most potent ally; our actions and empathy are its greatest enemy.

At this crucial time, I call on us to strengthen our fight against human trafficking. "It is not just about saving lives; it is about saving dreams." Strengthening policies, raising awareness, and fostering closer collaboration between countries is imperative. The battle against human trafficking is a battle for the very essence of our humanity, and it is one that we must win together.