Human Trafficking and Natural Disasters

Exploiting Misery

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Abstract

In the past few decades, governments and international organizations have begun to more seriously address the problem of human trafficking. It is generally believed that the aftermath of war and major economic transitions (e.g. the collapse of the Soviet Union), are situations where traffickers can easily exploit the hopeless state of victims. Natural disasters such as major earthquakes and tsunamis, are other situations that create uncertainty and hardship for many. This paper explores the possible link between human trafficking and natural disasters, using the aftermath of the 2010 Haiti earthquake and Typhoon Haiyan of 2013 as case studies. It argues that natural disasters exacerbate the root causes of human trafficking, including poverty and lack of viable livelihoods. The added shock of a natural disaster to an already vulnerable population can lead to an environment where human traffickers are more likely to be profitable. Among other recommendations, this paper emphasizes
the need to secure greater engagement of local stakeholders and provide increased access to safe spaces following a disaster.

Introduction: Human Trafficking Today

Human trafficking is defined by the U.S. Department of State as “the act of recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, or obtaining a person for compelled labor or commercial sex acts through the use of force, fraud, or coercion.” While it affects most countries around the world, human trafficking tends to flow from rural to urban/tourist areas and from less developed countries to more developed neighboring countries. Major source countries are in Asia – Southeast Asia in particular – as well as the former Soviet Union and Southeastern Europe. Victims are also primarily sent to Asia and the Middle East, Western Europe and North America. While victims can be young or old, male or female, the majority of trafficking victims are women under the age of 25, generally in their mid-to-late teens.

While human trafficking is not new, since the 1990s governments and international organizations began addressing the problem more seriously. It has resulted in an estimated 21 million victims in situations of forced or bonded labor, according to the International Labor Organization. While often thought to be largely comprised of sexual exploitation, people are also trafficked for the purpose of forced labor, i.e., working as domestic servants without pay or similar practices. Victims usually suffer from mental and physical abuse, mental breakdowns, sexually transmitted diseases, and the denial of medical care.

Generally, traffickers are likely to be successful in a climate of weak law enforcement and economic hardship. This often leads to desperation as the population seeks a better life elsewhere. The majority of victims of
human trafficking are “poor, isolated or … in a disadvantaged situation.”\textsuperscript{10} It is generally believed that major economic transitions (e.g. the collapse of the Soviet Union), as well as wars, attract traffickers who exploit the misery of hopeless victims. Natural disasters, such as major earthquakes and tsunamis, can also create uncertainty and hardship for many.

A number of organizations are making efforts to stop human trafficking. Included in these is the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which estimates it has assisted approximately 70,000 trafficked persons since 1994.\textsuperscript{11} The IOM approach includes prevention, direct assistance to trafficking victims, cooperation with governments and non-governmental organizations, and a human trafficking database that acts as a knowledge bank to draw statistics and guide policy makers on countertrafficking. The IOM and other organizations have also examined routes and trends in trafficking and the motivations of traffickers.

This paper will explore a possible link between human trafficking and natural disasters — a problem that a number of organizations are worried may continue to increase as a result of climate change. The paper will examine the perspectives of major organizations including the U.S. Department of State and the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), which argue that human trafficking flourishes in post-natural disaster settings. It will also consider the research of Montgomery (2011) and Gozdziak (2014), among others, who argue that the link between human trafficking and natural disasters has been exaggerated.

Despite the differing points of view, this paper argues that natural disasters likely exacerbate the root causes of human trafficking, including poverty and lack of viable livelihoods. The shock of a natural disaster on an already vulnerable population can lead to an environment where human
trafficking is more likely to be profitable. The paper also emphasizes the need for coordinated anti-trafficking efforts at all stages of a disaster in order to ensure a consistent and effective response.

**Natural Disasters — Powerful Storms Brewing**

Given the effects of climate change, the incidences of major natural disasters such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 may become more common. In 2013, more people were displaced by natural disasters (22 million) than by war, and experts believe that these numbers will only increase. While news of mega-disasters such as the 2004 tsunami make international headlines, significant human losses from smaller storms and floods often do not. The problem is largely concentrated in the developing world, with people from Asia comprising 80 percent of those displaced by natural disasters over the past five years. Migration from rural areas to cities can exacerbate the problem, with highly dense populations living in dangerous conditions, where it may be difficult to escape in the event of a disaster. The economic cost of natural disasters has increased from about $25 billion per year in the 1980s (adjusted for inflation) to an average of $130 billion per year in the period from 2004 to 2014.

In his 2015 State of the Union address, President Obama said that “no challenge poses a greater threat to future generations than climate change.” He went on to say that unless forceful action is taken, we will...
“continue to see rising oceans, longer, hotter heat waves, dangerous
droughts and floods, and massive disruptions that can trigger greater
migration and conflict and hunger around the globe.” As a result of
climate change, is it possible that greater incidences of human trafficking
are also more likely? According to many prominent international
organizations, the answer is a resounding yes.

The Link Between Human Trafficking and Natural Disasters

Francis Miko’s overview of the causes that fuel human trafficking
includes factors such as globalization and the subordination of women,
while also noting that human traffickers feed off “poverty, despair, war,
crisis and ignorance.” According to the U.S. Department of State, natural
disasters can increase both physical and economic insecurity while
disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable sectors of society such
as migrants, job seekers, and poorer families. As a result, disasters create
targets for exploitation and enslavement.

Prior to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, “little, if any research … [was]
conducted examining the role disasters play in increasing human
trafficking.” However, in recent years, more attention has been paid to a
possible link. As Miko describes, “traffickers might be tempted especially
to target children orphaned or separated from their families in such
disasters.” For example, immediately following the tsunami a number of
non-governmental organizations raised these concerns and reported
“several disturbing and negative trends” such as vulnerability to sexual
violence, exploitation, and trafficking. These trends have been repeated
in subsequent disasters including the later case studies.

The UNISDR expresses concern over vulnerabilities when children are
separated from their families. It states that the collapse or absence of a
state system after an emergency, in addition to other factors, leads to a chaotic environment that can be easily exploited by traffickers.²³ A recent report by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the sale of children noted that “the collapse or absence of a State system during and after an emergency results in a protection vacuum for children who may become separated from their families.”²⁴ The World Health Organization elaborates that where women’s options for employment are limited, as may be the case following a disaster, sexual exploitation may also increase.²⁵ Finally, Harvard’s Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research underscores that natural disasters are one of the primary environments for trafficking, “raising the need for a cogent international response to human trafficking in complex emergencies.”²⁶

Eric Bales, the lead author of the Global Slavery Index report, notes that the problem may not be as dramatic as “traffickers swooping in hours after a cyclone,” but rather a situation where families lose their homes, land, and possessions as a result of a natural disaster and in their vulnerable state, “fall prey to the blandishments of traffickers.”²⁷

One of the major problems, however, in fully examining the link is the lack of empirical data. This has led some academic researchers to question the continued reporting by the media and others of a connection between natural disasters and human trafficking, especially since the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Is the Threat Exaggerated? A Lack of Empirical Data

In a 2014 edition of the Forced Migration Review, Georgetown’s Gozdziak and Walter wrote that while the aftermath of natural disasters is “considered by many to be prime environments for trafficking in persons … the evidence for this is thin”²⁸ because of the lack of empirical
data. While there have been reports of trafficking following many natural disasters since the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Gozdzia
k and Walter refer to the phenomenon simply as a trend — one often exaggerated by Western media. The researchers also outline inconsistencies with respect to human trafficking concerns, noting that the 2012 tsunami and aftermath in Japan did not lead to speculations about trafficking as it did following other disasters. However, it may be the case that in an advanced, developed country such as Japan, the root causes of trafficking (described above by Miko) which include poverty and despair may have been less present. The USAID report notes that situations that lead to human trafficking are worse in countries with “prior histories of armed civil and/or social conflict.” As a result, once disaster struck in Japan, there was no preexisting elevated cause for concern, in contrast to the cases of Haiti and the Philippines where some of the root causes of human trafficking were present prior to the disaster. These examples will be discussed later in more detail.

The lack of empirical data on trafficking — not only after a disaster but prior to it as well — is one of the main problems when attempting to analyze trends between human trafficking and natural disasters. Gozdzia
k and Walter quote a UNCIEF spokesperson after a 2008 cyclone in Myanmar who argued about the need to be cautious about reports of increased trafficking because of the lack of “accurate figures on the numbers of people who are trafficked on a regular basis prior to the cyclone.” The researchers also argue that scholarly literature, while generally thorough with respect to policy and legal analysis, often lacks empirical data on actual cases of trafficking.

A report by Annemarie Samuels, an ethnographic researcher who was based in Bandah Aceh, Indonesia — one of the hardest-hit areas by the 2004 tsunami — from 2007 to 2014, concluded that “although it is likely
that illegal adoption took place in some cases … there is hardly evidence to prove large-scale child trafficking in the wake of the disaster.”32 She notes that these rumors persisted after the tsunami and became “forcefully affective” and “kept lingering under the surface.”33

Organizations that often raise concerns about trafficking following disasters have admitted a lack of empirical data. A recent U.N. Environmental Program report noted that data from anti-trafficking organizations suggest that trafficking may have increased by 20 to 30 percent during disasters but that “great uncertainty exists regarding the possible elevated levels of exploitation during political conflicts or climate-related disasters.”34

Samuels notes that there were some confirmed stories of trafficking following the 2004 tsunami, including some that were confirmed by a local Acehnese organization, the Center for Child Protection and Study. In addition, Indonesian government agencies confirmed that after the tsunami, while “hundreds of children have been taken to orphanages outside Aceh,”35 there has been little research into unconfirmed cases of trafficking, largely because these cases are difficult to investigate, as there is often no ability to prove illegal adoption or abuse. Samuel’s interview with a local police officer about the issue of trafficking provides a useful summary for the post-tsunami situation in Bandeh Aceh and for other disasters: “I cannot say that it is true, and I cannot say that it isn’t. I just don’t know.”36

Case Studies

The following section will examine in greater detail two recent locations where there have been reports of increased trafficking following a disaster,
namely the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.

**Haiti**

On January 12, 2010, Haiti was hit by a magnitude 7.0 earthquake, centered just 10 miles from the country’s capital, Port-au-Prince. The earthquake killed 230,000 people, injured 250,000 and left another 3 million people in need of assistance.\(^{37}\) Even prior to the earthquake, the situation was difficult for many in Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. According to the World Bank, more than half of Haitians live below the poverty line (living on less than $2.41 per day), and 24 percent live in absolute poverty (living on less than $1.23 per day).\(^{38}\) Prior to the earthquake, life expectancy was just 59 years, and the country had the highest share of adults with no education in the Latin America and Caribbean region.\(^{39}\) One child in 13 died before their fifth birthday, and a quarter of all children suffered from chronic undernutrition.\(^{40}\) The dire situation outlined above is one cause of the so-called ‘restavek’ system that developed in the country (‘restavek’ is Creole for ‘to stay with’ and comes from the French phrase ‘reste avec’). Under the restavek system, parents of children in the poorer, rural areas of Haiti send their children to live with wealthier families in cities — a situation that also led to large amounts of exploitation and child labor. While some children in the restavek system do attend school and are well cared for, most end up becoming domestic servants for their new masters. Physical and sexual abuse are also commonplace. The actual number of children in the restavek system prior to the earthquake is unknown but was estimated to be between 90,000 and 300,000.\(^{41}\) In a country with a population of just 10 million, this represents a significant portion of the population. An estimated 65 percent of the population in the restavek system is girls aged
6 to 14, largely because domestic workers over the age of 15 are required to be paid according to Haitian law.42

Following the earthquake, there were major concerns that the large number of orphaned children could result in more children being easier prey for traffickers. While there were reports of improvements before the earthquake, including teaching Haitians about the problem of trafficking, according to the head of the nongovernmental organization Haitian Support Inc., “the earthquake just open[ed] the box to a scarier situation.”43 The number of orphans was estimated to have skyrocketed from 380,000 prior to the earthquake to nearly one million following the disaster,44 creating many more vulnerable children and youth.

The U.S. Department of State’s annual Trafficking in Persons report classifies countries in four categories. Tier 1 countries fully comply with the Trafficking Victims Protection Act’s minimum standards. Tier 2 is made up of countries that do not fully comply but are making significant efforts to do so. The Tier 2 Watch List includes countries that suffer from a high absolute number or significantly increasing number of victims of extreme forms of trafficking; show no evidence of increased efforts to combat severe forms of trafficking from the previous year; or are making efforts to comply with minimum standards but only through commitments to take additional future steps in the following year. Finally, Tier 3 is made up of countries that are not making significant efforts to comply with the minimum standards. There were 23 countries in Tier 3 in the most recent report, including Iran, North Korea, Syria and Thailand (which was downgraded from the Tier 2 Watch List).45

The 2014 Trafficking in Persons Report by the U.S. State Department found that women and children living in the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps set up across Haiti after the earthquake were “at an increased
risk of sex trafficking and forced labor.” The report noted that Haitians were at risk of exploitation in the Dominican Republic and in other countries in the Caribbean. The Department’s 2013 Report also noted that actions made by the Haitian Government with respect to human trafficking prevention have been hampered because there is no comprehensive anti-trafficking legislation in the country. Furthermore, no progress was made to prosecute trafficking offenders.

In the most recent State Department report, it was noted that while Haiti “does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking … it is making significant efforts to do so.” While Haiti was on track to be downgraded to Tier 3 by the U.S. State Department, it remained on the Tier 2 Watch List because the government has an anti-human trafficking action plan that “would constitute making significant efforts to meet the minimum standards.”

**Typhoon Haiyan**

On November 8, 2013, one of the most powerful typhoons ever recorded made landfall in the central Philippines. Haiyan, or Yolanda as it is known in the Philippines, completely flattened parts of low-lying islands, damaging more than one million houses and displacing four million people. It was the Philippines’ deadliest natural disaster in its history. More than 7,000 people were killed. Following the disaster, reconstruction was slow, with President Aquino accused of “showing a lack of urgency in the reconstruction” in a region that is a stronghold of one of his political enemies. The typhoon hit the central provinces of Leyte and Samar, which are areas of the country that suffer from poverty and have historically been locations where many trafficked individuals have originated.
Prior to the disaster, the Philippines was classified by the U.S. State Department as being on the Tier 2 Watch List, as the government did not comply with the minimum standards to eliminate human trafficking and showed no evidence of making significant progress. Following the disaster, the 2014 State Department report noted that the “full extent of the typhoon’s effect on trafficking … is unknown.” However, it also noted that the media and the U.S. Department of Justice have reported and investigated allegations of trafficking and illegal recruiting. There were warnings by organizations, including Save the Children, following the disaster that because children were sent away before the typhoon’s arrival, many have been orphaned and are therefore “very vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and trafficking.” The United Kingdom’s International Development Secretary also expressed concern about the safety of women and girls, and “in particular the trafficking of girls.”

There was also concern that compared to Haiti — a small island nation — the geography of the Philippines, with more than 7,000 islands, makes it even more difficult to keep track of all affected children. The number of children is also large, with families in rural areas having an average of 3.8 children.

Since the disaster, the situation in the Philippines has improved, and the country has been on the State Department’s Tier 2 list for the past two years. The government has taken some steps to reduce the problem, including doubling funding for the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking in 2013 and making efforts to implement national, regional, and provincial-level anti-trafficking laws and policies. However, the Philippines continues to be classified as a source country, with a “significant number of the estimated 10 million Filipino men, women, and children who migrate abroad for skilled and unskilled work … subsequently subjected to sex trafficking and forced labor.” The same problems exist domestically as well, with movement largely from rural...
communities to urban areas and tourist sites. While progress has been made, corruption has continued to undermine these overall efforts.\(^{58}\)

**Recommendations**

Recognizing the problem is key in dealing with human trafficking since it is often simply ignored. With a focus on more immediate concerns, the response to a disaster often simply does not include efforts to combat human trafficking.

Following the earthquake in Haiti, the State Department’s Ambassador-at-Large in the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, noted a number of key lessons with respect to trafficking following a disaster. One of the lessons included the need to recognize that “counter-trafficking interventions should be included in contingency planning, and must start in the emergency phase of a disaster response.”\(^{59}\) Proper planning can help ensure that, following the emergency phase of a disaster, fewer gaps exist for human traffickers to take advantage of.

The other lessons mentioned by the State Department include the need to focus less on movement (generally across borders) and more on exploitation in general since an overemphasis on cross-border movement can compromise actions within a country through the “mis-deployment of counter-trafficking resources to border areas.” It also mentioned a need for greater focus on legislation, social norms, and education campaigns within countries with high level of human trafficking. Many countries have yet to adopt modern anti-slavery laws and as a result, a legislative vacuum is often created. Engagement of local stakeholders was also considered essential, including the need to “identify the needs of the community, to plan effective interventions, and to obtain the necessary support for their implementation.”\(^{60}\)
One effort of the international community incorporates the voices of those most directly affected. In 2011, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) launched the Children's Charter and Action Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction. The charter was unique, as children affected by disasters were directly involved in the process. Priority areas were decided on in consultation with hundreds of children in 21 countries who were asked about the impact of disasters on their lives. One of the priorities calls for the recognition of the importance of child protection at all stages of a disaster. With the majority of trafficking victims being children, especially young girls, protection includes the specific need to protect against traffickers.

Some of the other areas mentioned as part of this priority include the need to provide special care to deal with traumatization as well as skills on how children can protect themselves from additional risks following a disaster. While the UNICEF effort has been followed up with other youth networks with the goal of identifying key priorities for youth, there are still a number of gaps to be filled, including more of a “recognition … and more systematic engagement of children and youth as credible stakeholders in national and local level disaster risk management.”

The UNISDR has agreed that many do not immediately think of the need to protect the vulnerable following a disaster. As expected, often the primary response is to solve the immediate need, such as delivering food in the aftermath of a drought. However, as a Save the Children executive noted, “drought causes displacement and increases vulnerability … disasters also require protection and funding mechanisms.” Efforts made in the area of protection often suffer from lack of coordination and no clear allocation of roles and responsibilities, leading to “confusion, unnecessary duplication of efforts and significant protection gaps.”
Practically, there are a number of efforts from organizations on the ground in post-disaster zones making an effort to combat the problem of flourishing human trafficking environments. Firstly, officials from organizations such as UNICEF and Save Children often attempt to reunite children with their families. Identifying, registering, and providing interim care for children who have been separated from their families are important steps in this process.  

A number of aid organizations have also expressed that a key post-disaster priority is to ensure children can resume normal activities, such as school, as quickly as possible. To do this, organizations such as Save the Children are working on providing safe spaces as well as access to counselling. Safe spaces are particularly important, because many of schools are either destroyed in a disaster or are needed as emergency evacuation centers. There are also a variety of physical safety hazards as a result of debris that can put children at even greater risks.

An important initiative is the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the successor to the Hyogo Framework for Action: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters. Launched in 2005, the Hyogo Framework was a “10-year international blueprint for disaster risk reduction.” With the successor Framework adopted earlier this year, many, including the UNISDR Chief Margareta Wahlström, pushed for the UNICEF Children’s Action Plan to form a substantive part of the plan. At the recent U.N. World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan, there were discussions on the importance of a “reaffirmation of commitments by children and youth” in the post-2015 framework, as well as “continued dialogue between children and youth in advancing the disaster risk reduction agenda.”

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Harvard’s Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research is also working with a variety of organizations, including many mentioned above such as UNICEF, the International Labour Organization and the International Organization for Migration, to develop plans for “building the international response to human trafficking in complex situations.” The IOM recognizes a need for a “clear, sustainable, international response to human trafficking” that includes concrete tools and early warning and emergency response mechanisms to build capacity of international organizations. The Harvard program notes that the process must also include specific programming to address the issue.

While international organizations play an important role, it is important that the government take the lead in order to avoid problems such as redundancy and “fostering dependence on the international community.” It is also necessary to secure engagement of local stakeholders and take cultural factors into consideration through building the capacity of civil society and other organizations within the country.

**Conclusion**

Since the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 there has been greater awareness of the role human trafficking plays after a disaster. The examples above, following the 2010 Haiti earthquake and the 2013 typhoon in the Philippines demonstrate just two instances of how countries that already faced a problem of human trafficking can end up in an even worse situation after disaster strikes. However, it is important to question the linkage between human trafficking and natural disasters because many of the reports of the past 10 years — when the issue first gained prominence — have been largely anecdotal. Recent research by Gozdziak, Walter, and others have emphasized the lack of reputable empirical evidence surrounding the effect of natural disasters on human trafficking.
Nevertheless, there is agreement that the root causes that lead human trafficking to flourish, including instability and poverty, are often exacerbated in the aftermath of a disaster. With trends pointing toward more frequent natural disasters in the future, the work of organizations such as UNICEF, Save the Children, and others to bring human trafficking to the forefront is crucial. While the focus on immediate needs in the immediate aftermath of a disaster is and should continue to be important, the needs of the vulnerable population — whether to find a safe space for children or to make efforts to resume as close to a normal routine as possible — must be just as important. The follow-up to the Hyogo Framework for Action provides an excellent opportunity to ensure that the needs of vulnerable populations, and mitigating the potential for trafficking, are also at the top of list when dealing with an emergency situation.

The fight against human trafficking is difficult, and there are few indicators that can be used to identify success. The indicators that are available suggest that, to date, “the number of victims prosecuted and the number of victims helped has been low.”71 While different definitions of ‘trafficking’ among different jurisdictions can result in difficulties, international cooperation remains vital. Anti-trafficking efforts — before a disaster, during a disaster, and post-disaster — must be coordinated to ensure a consistent and effective response. Luis C. deBaca, the former U.S. ambassador in the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, notes that partnerships are key to success: “Partnerships with Harvard, with the academic world, with NGOs on the ground … are how we will fight this fight. We cannot do this alone.”72

3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 37.
6 Note: Estimates can vary since the crime is often hidden.
8 Miko, 37.
9 Ibid., 38.
10 Reianu, 73.
11 IOM, Counter-Trafficking, https://www.iom.int/cms/countertrafficking
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Miko, 38.
21 Miko, 38.
22 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
35 Samuels.
36 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
42 CdeBaca.
44 Tackett, 1031.
47 Ibid.
49 Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid., 314.


Calkins.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Singh.

Ibid.

CdeBaca.

Tania Branigan, "Typhoon Haiyan: Children in Disaster Zone Are Vulnerable, Warns Unicef." The Guardian, November 20, 2013,
http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/20/typhoon-haiyan-children-vulnerable-unicef

Singh.

UNISDR.


CdeBaca.

Miko, 40.

Ibid.