

Indigenous peoples and the anti-trafficking sector's blindspot



Credit: Azzedine Rouichi

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The opportunity to highlight the intersection with trafficking for exploitation to mark the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples was obvious, considering the well-documented discrimination indigenous peoples face. The International Labour Organisation was one of the first to recognise indigenous peoples' rights as human rights under international law with the adoption of Convention 107, followed by Convention 169.

However, the precious little published material available and accessible on this subject suggests that the anti-trafficking sector has failed indigenous people. Our research threw up a handful of reports on individual countries, which we have collated into this briefing to provide the start of a global overview of the experience of indigenous peoples and human trafficking.

We hope that this will mark a turnaround, exposing the long-standing need to build a better understanding of the trafficking experience of indigenous peoples, so that we are better equipped to stand in solidarity with indigenous communities defending their rights.

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Introduction



There are an estimated **370 million** indigenous people around the world.[1] Today, indigenous peoples are counted among the populations made most vulnerable to human trafficking.[2] Indigenous communities are usually overlooked when it comes to institutional reporting and data collection on forced labor and trafficking due to problematic definitions of trafficking coupled with the usually remote living arrangements of indigenous communities and their relationships with state authorities.

However, in some cases, an inflation of incidence is misattributed to indigenous communities, particularly women and girls, due to the legal status and criminalization of sex work and the equating of sex work with trafficking. The overall result is that hard figures capturing an accurate scale of the issue as well as appropriate prevention measures tailored to these indigenous populations are scarce.

Some common factors which contribute to the vulnerability of these populations to trafficking are:

- Lack of access to educational institutions
- Cultural barriers to education, employment and support services
- Political marginalization/ lack of decision-making opportunities
- Poverty
- Access to housing
- Neo-colonial practices that contribute to environmental degradation and forced dispersal from traditional territories

- Statelessness and denial of citizenship
- Denial of rights to traditional lands/land dispossession
- Racism

Historical Background

The enslavement of indigenous peoples and the indigenous slave trade are a part of world history usually forgotten, but some estimate that around 2.5 to 5 million indigenous peoples were enslaved throughout the Americas – and distributed internationally – between the 15th and 19th centuries.[3]

In Spain, the enslavement of indigenous peoples was outlawed in the 16th century, both at home and in its territories – with notable exceptions that essentially allowed for the continued flourishing indigenous slave trade in Latin America. In Australia, forced labor of indigenous peoples occurred even after the abolition of chattel slavery by the U.K. in their colonies, and United States, with trading in indigenous children becoming a common practice.

Unfortunately, indigenous peoples continue to be subjected to trafficking and forced labor to this day. To make matters worse, these communities are often overlooked by global anti-trafficking efforts. Below, we break down how some of the world's indigenous communities are impacted by trafficking.



Nepal was the first country in Asia to ratify the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (C169) of the International Labour Organization (ILO). Over 35% of the Nepalese population is indigenous. Despite this, indigenous persons are routinely marginalized, disenfranchised and left out of the decision-making processes that affect their quality of life.

Data gathered in 2019 by Nepal's National Human Rights Commission found that around 49% of women trafficking survivors were indigenous peoples or *Adivasi Janajati*, as they are known in Nepal.[4] They reported that indigenous communities were particularly vulnerable due to a lack of access to education and crippling poverty. The Commission estimates that the more than 17,000 women and girls trafficked every year to India alone are usually forced into sex work, circus work, domestic servitude and are targeted for organ harvesting. Most are promised well-paying jobs and opportunities by traffickers.



Credit: Damian Pankowicz

Plan International corroborates the approximate figure for trafficked indigenous girls and women and also attributes “entrenched discriminatory practices”, such as the caste system, as a major contributing factor to vulnerability to trafficking.[5] Further, according to a joint report by the National Coalition Against Racial Discrimination and Cultural Survival, 65% of indigenous ancestral land has been seized by the state, forcing them to relocate.[6]

In Jharkhand state in **India**, more than 25% of the population belongs to an indigenous group, known as “Adivasi, literally meaning ‘indigenous people’ or ‘original inhabitants’”. [7] These indigenous communities are overwhelmingly economically dependent on mining mica, a natural mineral that gives make-up and electronics their glittery shine. But many people whose livelihoods depend on small-scale mica mining in Jharkhand state – one of the world’s top mica producers – are trapped in cycles of poverty and bonded labor.

Freedom United has launched a pledge urging the global community to join the fight against debt bondage of indigenous communities in mica mining.[8]

The Caribbean



Indigenous peoples make up just over 9% of Guyana's overall population but are perceived to be the majority of the country's trafficked population. In fact, many have seen trafficking as an indigenous problem with little state intervention to prevent sex trafficking and domestic servitude of numerous women and girls.[9] Guyana's indigenous population has settled mostly in the hinterland regions of the country, where many companies have set up mining operations and are the main sites of reported trafficking. Advocates have reported forced labor of mainly women and girls in brothels near mining sites in addition to being trafficked to nearby countries such as Barbados, Suriname and Venezuela.[10]

Due to their remote location, there is a lack of access to equivalent services enjoyed on the coast, including education and law enforcement. Many traditional lands that were taken over by first the colonial authorities and then the independent state have been sold to gold mining companies as concessions, and employment opportunities are scarce. Some advocates argue that many indigenous women go into sex work willingly as options are lacking and that the state, influenced by poor rankings over the years in the US TIP report, is conflating sex work and trafficking.[11] This, it is argued, puts them in danger of being trafficked as sex work is illegal in Guyana and so they cannot seek protection if their employers become abusive.



Credit: Yakov Oskanov



Trafficking statistics for **Colombia** aren't disaggregated into ethnic groups, indicating a need for greater research into the impacts of trafficking on indigenous communities. In addition to broad trends globally on the unique systemic inequalities faced by indigenous groups, isolated indigenous communities in Colombia are also at risk of being forcibly recruited by armed groups.[12]

Alarming, according to the United Nations Development Programme "of the 102 indigenous groups in Colombia, 62.7% are in a critical humanitarian situation as a result of the abuse of their human rights and land rights [...] 35 indigenous groups are at risk of physical and cultural extinction as a result of economic interests, extraction of natural resources and/or armed conflict in the country's indigenous territories." [13]

Indigenous peoples make up 6.5% of the country's population of 120 million and there are at least 68 indigenous groups spread across Mexico's territory. The geographical dispersal and isolation of these groups coupled with cultural and linguistic diversity has contributed to historical and current marginalization and exploitation of these communities.

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Interlinking systemic discrimination constructs vulnerability to trafficking for indigenous communities in Mexico.[14] Furthermore, the oversight from local and federal authorities further marginalizes these groups and impedes accurate assessments of the true scale and impact of trafficking within these communities. A recent report by El Pacto por Los Derechos Humanos outlines how trafficking data on separate indigenous groups isn't sufficiently recorded or recognized "creating a blindspot for authorities." [15]

North America



The Indigenous peoples in Canada and the United States continue to be disproportionately represented in recorded numbers of trafficking survivors. The long-term impacts of colonization, displacement, racism, discrimination and barriers to education that have led to higher instances of poverty and homelessness are some of the contributing factors to increased instances of abuse and violence facing indigenous communities.

At the intersection of these vulnerabilities, the risk of trafficking increases. A 2018 report by the Native Women’s Association of Canada found that indigenous women are overrepresented in national trafficking cases in Canada making up a staggering 50% of identified trafficking victims, but only 4% of the population.



Credit: Ric Jacyno

This overrepresentation of indigenous women and girls in trafficking statistics, within North America and elsewhere, is situated within a historical context of systemic violence, family separation and land dispossession at the hands of the state. Trafficking does not occur in a vacuum. In fact, the systemic exploitation that laid the foundation for the conditions that allow this crime to thrive today can be traced back hundreds of years.

In the context of the U.S., a 2019 investigation from Searchlight New Mexico uncovered the extent to which indigenous women and girls in the state of New Mexico are overlooked by authorities as trafficking survivors in need of support – they are “the least recognized and least protected population.”[16]



Credit: Bogdan Sonjachnyj

Looking Forward



The legacy of colonization continues to harm indigenous communities around the world and drives structural inequalities that construct vulnerability to trafficking. Indigenous communities must be empowered to lead the charge in developing policies and processes that hold structural change and holistic systems of trauma-informed healing at their center in order to build sustainable resilience of these communities to modern slavery and trafficking. But first, they must be seen.

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Number of actions current as of publication



End debt bondage in mica
6,000 Signatures

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