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Dynamic of gender violence and trafficking of women in Mexico: a study on Monterrey City

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Abstract

Trafficking of women for the purpose of sexual exploitation is one of the fastest growing gender violence around the world. Today, this phenomenon has become an integral part of the social and economic fabric in Mexico as in other part of world. This practice causes intolerable degradation and suffering for the girls and young women involved, who are treated as a commodity. This process result a risk to their physical and mental health and in particular to their sexual health due to immense violence, which I have tried explore in this research. Twenty women were interviewed during the year 2007 and 2008 who are currently working as commercial sex workers in Monterrey City.

Keywords: *gender violence, trafficking of women, health consequences and Monterrey, Mexico*

Today, trafficking of women and girl is rapidly expanding global industry. Women trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation are at high risk of unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, physical and sexual violence (ICWAD Trafficking Facts, 2004). The International Labour Organization estimates that currently 12.3 million people worldwide are victims of forced labour. About one fifth of all forced labourers around the world are trafficked which includes 98 percent of women and girls. Nearly 43 percent of women and girls trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation, 32 percent for economic exploitation and 25 for mixed purposes (ILO, 2005).

In the year 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially women and Children, and defined *trafficking in persons* as:

„...The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs...”.

Sex trafficking, which is violence against women also known as gender-based violence, is a serious violation of women's human rights. Data shows that worldwide, one out of five women is victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime (UN Millennium Project, 2005), while one out of three women is beaten, coerced into sex or abused by a family member or an acquaintance (Heise *et al.*, 1999). Gender-based violence, which includes physical, emotional violence, dowry death and female infanticide as well as forced prostitution, sex trafficking and slavery, is an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of equality, development and peace; it violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.

In recent years, violence against women has received increased attention from international law. For example, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and its Optional Protocol, 1979/1999, calls on States to pursue a 'policy of eliminating violence against women'. We can also mention the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993); the chapter devoted to violence against women in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted by the UN World Conference on Women (1995); the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998), which includes sexual violence such as rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy within the definition of crimes against humanity and war crimes; and the Beijing review (Beijing +5), which calls for the criminalization of violence against women on the basis of racial grounds, and included honour crimes for the first time. Nevertheless, until now no effective results can be observed. On the contrary, the number of victims of gender-based violence, such as trafficking of women for the purpose of sexual exploitation, is continuing grow.

On the other hand, women, who are trafficked and forced into commercial sex work, are at high risk for contracting sexually transmitted diseases, which increase the risk for contracting HIV. Also, they are often subject to violent or dangerous sex practices that allow the virus to more easily enter the body. According to

Policing the National Body: Sex, Race, and Criminalization, A Project of the Committee on Women, Population, and the Environment (2002) numerous case studies have found that women in prostitution have significantly higher rates of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and infections (STIs), hepatitis, HIV/AIDS, and other sexual health problems. STDs of the upper and lower reproductive tracts, including syphilis, genital herpes, chancroid, trichomoniasis, chlamydia, and gonorrhoea increase the HIV transmission rate in women two to ten times. The report states, HIV/AIDS is both a stark disease burden and also a biomarker of the gendered condition of women and of male sexual consumption. (http://www.stopvaw.org/Trafficking_and_HIV_AIDS.html)

Thus, gender-based violence such as trafficking of women has serious health repercussions for victims that extend far beyond immediate physical injuries. Coerced sex—whether the result of domestic abuse, rape or trafficking - leads to unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, and reproductive health problems.

Considering the above discussion, the principal aim of this research is to see how sexual violence suffered by trafficked women in Mexico especially in Monterrey city makes women vulnerable to greater health risks. This article has three specific objectives. Firstly, to analyze the socio-demographic profile of trafficked women. Secondly, investigate the major causes and mechanisms of women trafficking in Mexico. Finally, examine the sexual violence suffered by the trafficked women in their profession, and how this lead to health suffering.

The article is divided into two sections. First, the article describes the existing literature on sex trafficking, focusing mainly on violence and on health consequences. Next, the article analyzes results from field work carried out in Monterrey, focusing on the socio-demographic characteristics of trafficked women, as well as causes, mechanism of trafficking, sexual violence suffered, and health risks faced by these women.

Literature and Framework

In the last two decades, however research in Mexico has shifted towards an understanding of heterogeneity of those involved in the sex industry, but till the date it is difficult to tell the exact number of women being trafficked into the prostitution business. There are evidences, but it is complicated to figure out the trafficked women, for example, Teresa Ulloa, President of Regional Coalition Against Trafficking of Women and Children in Latin America and Caribbean stated that every day 400 women enter into prostitution¹ in Mexico City, out of which 80% are against their will (González, 2003).

¹ This figure includes trafficked and non-trafficked women.

In another study, Acharya and Stevaneto (2005) found that every year nearly 10,000 young girl and women trafficked in Mexico to different cities like Mexico City, Cancun, Acapulco, Ciudad Juarez, Monterrey city etc. for the purpose of sexual exploitation. The same study also underlines that in Chiapas (the southern state of Mexico), in every 10 trafficked women 7 are trafficked inside the country and 3 are taken outside the country. The above cited research also indicates that after the economic crisis and peso (Mexican currency) devaluation, the sexual tourism in the country is booming and this resulting in the increase of trafficking in women.

On the other hand, little research has been conducted on health status of commercial sex workers in Mexico. A study conducted among commercial sex workers by Torres *et.al* (1988, 1990) in Guadalajara city of Mexico shows the prevalence rate of HIV positive as 0.4%, against the 1987 and 1988 study of the Dirección General de Epidemiología of Mexico carried out in six Mexican cities found the HIV positive prevalence rate as 0.9% to 5.2% (Dirección General de Epidemiología, 1989). Valdespino *et.al* (1990) interviewed 3612 commercial sex workers in 20 Mexican cities and result indicates that 0.4% of women had HIV positive. In the year 1999 Consejo Nacional para la Prevención y Control del SIDA (CONASIDA) conducted a HIV positive test among 1915 commercial sex workers in Mexico City and found that the HIV positive prevalence rate is 0.36% (CONASIDA, 1999).

Similarly, Conde *et.al* studied the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases among commercial sex workers in Mexico City. Their study concludes that 10.1% women had syphilis, 9% had been infected by AntiHbc, 69.8% by Simple Herpes type-2, 2.1% by Gonorrhea and 23.7% by Chlamydia (Conde, *et.al* 1993). In 1993 Juarez and others of INSP (Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública) interviewed 495 commercial sex workers and found that 48.9% had pop smear and 43% had cervical cancer (Secretaría de Salud, 1993). All these researches have established to the fact that women working as commercial sex workers are very much exposed to the infection of RTI, STI and HIV/AIDS. Hence the problems need a better understanding about its intent and extent of the risk. Particularly in Mexico trafficking of women for the purpose of prostitution is becoming an increasingly lucrative business, where women from the poorest regions are at risk of being abused (Acharya, 2005).

It should come as no surprise that women are vulnerable to the nexus between trafficking and sexually transmitted infection like HIV/AIDS. The approach of national public health to sexually transmitted infection and HIV/AIDS increasingly recognizes that women's vulnerability to HIV is integrally connected with discrimination and violence. Today, this has become an important subject for politicians, academicians and for the general public due to its consequences on health and rapid changes in the number of HIV/AIDS patients. For example, in

the year 2005 in general in Mexico there were 108,781 personas living with HIV positive which increased to 109,125 just after one year in 2006. Whereas in 2007 it has come to 114,725 cases and in 2008 it reaches to 118,299 cases, where 5 percent of all these identified cases were from Monterrey city (CONASIDA, 2008)². This data provides a glimpse that how the country is experiencing a serious epidemic of sexually transmitted infection, like HIV. One of the important factors of this increasing number is unprotected heterosexual behavior and the growing sex market in various Mexican cities including the Mexico City.

The studies on trafficking (Kempadoo and Doezema, 1998, GAATW, 2001, Acharya, 2005, Binh, 2006) has identified that this business is associated with a high health risk primarily causes due to lack of access to services, isolation, and exploitative working conditions. The trafficking of women for sexual exploitation is accompanied by potentially lifelong and/or life-threatening health consequences. It prevents victims from attaining the highest possible level of physical, mental and social well being. It is necessary to address the health implications of trafficking, because this process itself becomes a health hazard, where victims' health is further endangered in situations of sexual exploitation.

Research Methodology

Trafficked women are treated as hidden population, thus an appropriate and flexible methodology was pursued during the field work. To locate the trafficked women in Monterrey city, first we³ went to down town area of the city, where brothels are located. We entered to a brothel and talked with a woman. Later we paid her 300 pesos (US\$30) and took her to a private room to talk with her personally. We informed her about our project and asked her to find out trafficked women who are working in the same as well as nearer brothels. In the beginning she decline to help, but after regular interaction with her, she agreed to cooperate us in location of trafficked women but would charge 100 pesos (US\$10). Whenever she was obtaining information and arranging an interview she was calling us.

After getting the information we went directly to indicated women, produced our identity and asked her about an interview. As all brothels have a constant vigilance by the pimps and traffickers, it is not possible talk for a long time with women in front of all. So, we were paying solicited amount and taking her to a private room located inside the brothel. This method we also adopted to keep hidden our identity in front of the pimp and traffickers, and once getting into the room we were taking her interview.

² <http://www.censida.salud.gob.mx/interior/cifras.html>

³ I went with one of my student who was collaborating with me in this project.

Moreover, at the beginning of the interview, we offered the women to come our house or to another hotel or a restaurant, but they always responded with a “no”. They used to tell us „...*this is our area; it is not possible for us to go out from this place, because madrina (madam) do not permit us to work in other places....*”. Since the women were not allowed to leave the brothel, we acted as a “client”. Once we were inside the private room, we were interviewing them around 30 minutes. After completing the interview, we were requesting her to help us to find other trafficked women like her. With help of these women, we constructed a chain and discovered other trafficked women inside the Monterrey city and interviewed 20 women during 2007 and 2008.

General characteristics of trafficked women

It is difficult to underline a specific cause for trafficking in Mexico especially towards the Monterrey city, but this study found that trafficking in women is a result of „*multi-causal factors*”. During the interviews women were cited wide ranges of factors why they fall into trafficking network. Poverty, lack of job opportunities (unemployment), gender based discrimination, deserted by husband, ethnic conflict, migration and employment in USA, infertility, infidelity, domestic violence are some of the principal reasons for trafficking in women Mexico (see figure 1).

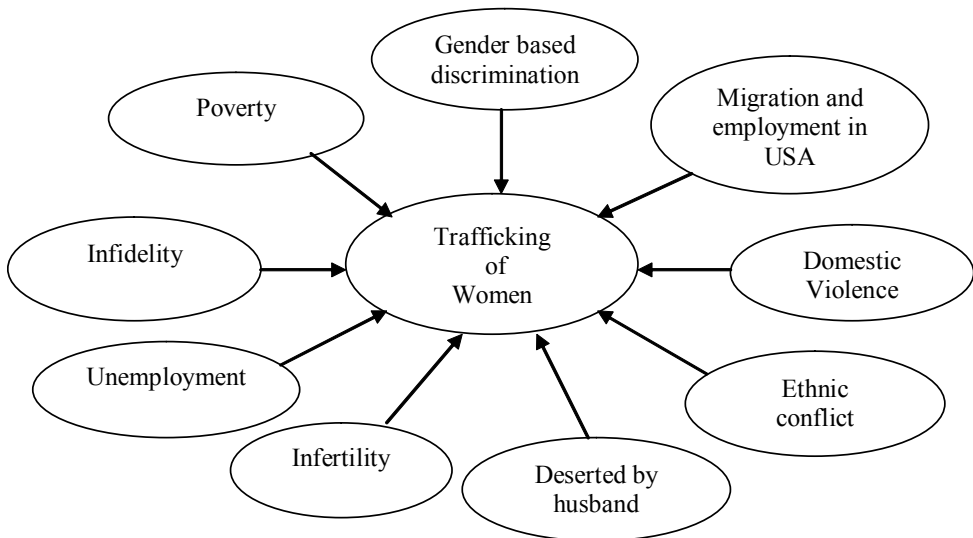


Figure 1. Associated factor in trafficking of women

Once the traffickers bring out the woman from her place of origin, most of the time they put them in different intermediaries places and gives women of training, such as how to perform the sexual relation(s), way of negotiation with clients, type of dress to wear, also other rules and regulations of the brothel; like not to go out from the brothel without the permission of owner, not to talk and give any self personal information as well as of others to anybody, among others.

Information obtained from the field work indicates that false promises of employment as well as an exotic life in cities of Mexico and United States is a common tactic for traffickers. When the women come to know the reality of their kind of employment, in most cases they refuse to accept. When this happens, the pimp and traffickers use various kind of violence to force the women to stay and work in the brothel. Many women said that after leaving home, their life became a „life of violence”. This kind of violence has lots of impact basically on the health of women.

The study found that out of twenty trafficked women fourteen were trafficked from different rural areas and six were from urban centers areas of Mexico. Trafficked women in Monterrey were significantly younger, out of twenty women sixteen were less than 20 years old. This is an important characteristics of this illicit market is that only young women are considered. Basically, pimps do not prefer the women who are older in age. According to a brothel owner: „.....*woman after the 25 years old is consider as older and aged for this industry and also clients do not prefer this kind of woman.....*”. She explained that clients often told her „.....*the aged women do not have the same passion as a 15 years have....*”.

When it come to the educational attainment of trafficked women, nearly half of them (ten women) were never attained their formal education and rest of them were educated up to primary and above primary level education. In term of their marital status, sixteen women said that they were unmarried; three women were single mother but currently not living with their children, whereas only one woman said she was married and now separated because of family violence. This reflects that majority of the trafficked women were single and unmarried. It shows another characteristics of this sex market, where only young unmarried women are preferred. A pimp cited: „.....*I do not want to buy a married woman even a divorced, because for me she is just like a used cloth, where she does not have the same smell like a new one....*”.

On the other hand, it is important to point out that the brothel is treated as a market, where victim are considered as a commodity, and in this place each aspect depends on the loss and gain. For example, if a pimp buys a woman of twenty years old married or divorced, she is less preferred by clients, which signify pimp cannot obtain her optimum earning from the woman. Also, this woman can work in the brothel maximum 4 to 5 years (as women more than 25 years old consider as old in this business). Whereas if a pimp buys a woman of 15 years old or less,

she can easily put her in job for minimum 7 to 8 years, also this young woman will be highly preferred by clients and receives more clients, which will generate a high profit to pimp. So, in total a brothel owner will earn more money when buys an unmarried-young woman than an elder married woman.

Looking into the other demographic characteristics of the trafficked women, this study found that majorities of women (17 out of 20) were mestizo ethnic group (Spanish mixed race) and rests of them were indigenous. The question is: *why more women were mestizo?* After the conversation with pimps, traffickers and women the study concludes that mestizo women are highly preferred by the clients because of their white skin color. One pimp says: „...*clients do not want to have the sex with dark skin girl, they do not prefer indigenous women, though I can buy an indigenous woman in a cheaper price than a mestizo, but on her my (economic) gain is very marginal...*”. In Mexico in general the Spanish mixed people have fair skin whereas the indigenous have the dark skin. This indicates one more attribute of this market.

Exposure to violence

Much of the available empirical research on trafficked women and commercial sex indicates that women experience high levels of violence, including, but not limited to, physical assaults, sexual assaults, verbal threats or abuse, psychological abuse (Lowman, 2000, Raymond, 2004, Acharya, 2006, Acharya, 2008). However, some researchers analyzed that violence is ubiquitous in all forms of prostitution (for example Barry, 1995); others believe that the incidence of violence varies enormously in different prostitution venues. Also, it may vary from one brothel owner and trafficker to another.

While this new emphasis on the domination of power and suppression in trafficking of women is long overdue. This study suggests that we need to proceed cautiously when assessing claims about the frequency and nature of the violence perpetrated by pimps and traffickers. During the interviews and analysis, it is clearly found that the incidence of both physical and sexual violence at the hand of traffickers and pimps is common in the life cycle of these trafficked women, which do not have any limit. Here, I have analyzed the women who were exposed to kind of physical and sexual violence in three different frequencies, i.e. frequently, occasionally and rarely in the past six months at the time of interview. I have categorized these levels as follows: Frequently violence as aggression faced every day, Occasionally, violence faced once in a two week and Rarely as violence faced once in a month.

The result indicates that trafficked women in Monterrey have faced a wide range of violence frequently such as; abused verbally, locked inside the room

without alimentation, threaten by pimps to kill them, forced to have sex with more than one client at a time and also slapped by pimps as well as by clients. Whereas, in the category of occasionally faced violence, the study obtained that sometime women were beaten with objects by pimps, drag by cigarette, raped by pimps, and some time pimp put chili powder in their eyes and vagina. Similarly, in the category of rarely violence faced, women were intended to burn by pimps, threaten to kill by pimp and also stabbed by them.

Analysis indicates that women faced physical and sexual violence everyday and some time the intensity of these violence are also high which caused severe wound or injury to woman. A woman indicated during the interview: „...*for us violence is common, it is nothing new, we are habituated on this, here we do not have right on our body, here we treated just like an animal, it is madrina (madam) who decide all for us, when we have to work, with whom we have to work, what to do or not, when we have to eat, sleep etc., all these depend on her, we do not have right to tell a 'no', if we do not follow her words she just use her power in many ways, for her our life is nothing, in this place her dog has more respect than us....*”. Thus, once the women obligate to enter to this profession her life each time in danger. In sum, these kinds of exploitation construct them as victims and risk them fall into health illness.

On the other hand, the study found that trafficked women in Monterrey suffered different grades of suffering (sexual and social) since entrance to profession and exist. I have divided this grade of suffering into three categories on the basis the age of the women, such as: Sexual suffering (women of less than 20 year old), Psychological suffering (women 20 to 25 years old) and Social suffering (women after 25 years old) (see figure 2). Data obtain from the field indicates that women of less than 20 years are exposed to an extreme grade of sexual exploitation both by pimps and traffickers. For owners they are just a source of money. Young women are charges a high amount of money for their services, so pimps and traffickers ask them to solicit numbers of clients (8 to 10 clients) in a day. For example, during the discussion a *madrina* (madam) said that: „*a jovencita (young women) is a golden hen for me. As far as she is young, I have to exploit her as much as possible to earn my money. Once she grown up (after 20 years) clients will not prefer her so I cannot gain more money*”.

Once a woman becomes 20 years old, the sexual exploitation against her reduces significantly. Because, she is less preferred by the clients as well as she has already worked for many years in the brothel. This causes a marginal economic gain for the owners, so pimp intends to replace her with other young woman. For substituting her, *madrina* (madam) commences different kinds of psychologically abuse as well as verbally-physically, so that trafficked woman may leave the brothel on her own decision. Moreover, woman also faces racial discrimination by traffickers and pimps. For example, a woman of 23 years said: „*now madrina (madam) do not like me, everyday she is scolding me, beating me and discri-*

minating me with other young women, telling that now I am an «una vaca vieja» (old cow), clients do not like me, whenever I am trying to do good she is not satisfied with me. I have already worked with her more than seven years, now where I will go... she has already spoiled my body and my life... I do not know what to do now and where to go...”.

Moreover, trafficked women (of 25 and more years old) who leave the brothel, tries to lead a normal life like others in the society. But their earlier profession makes them vulnerable for the social adaption. As Mexican society is a conservative, the cultural taboos become obstacle for the women in the process of social assimilation. Returned trafficked women suffer a wide range of discrimination such as isolation, people consider as bad luck to seeing their face in early morning etc., for which some of them prefer to suicide and some return to prostitution as a madam or as a lower category sex worker.

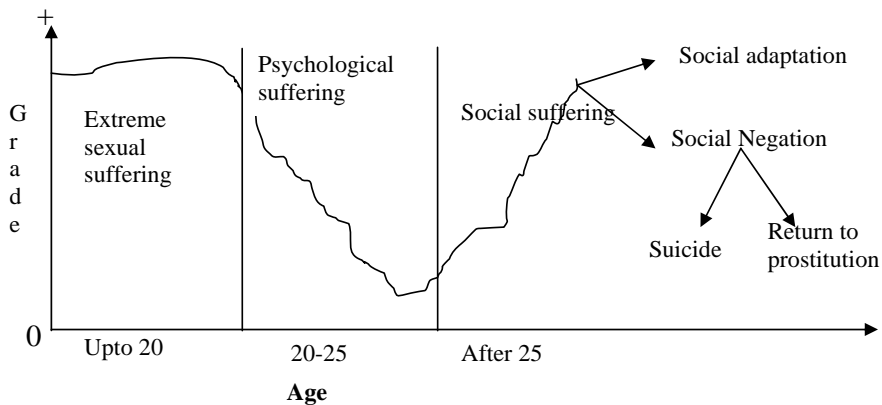


Figure 2. Grade of exploitation against the trafficked women

Sexual activities of trafficked women

Sexual activities of trafficked woman are very important as these are closely related with their health. It also encompasses the problems of HIV and STIs/RTIs, unintended pregnancy and abortion, infertility and cancer resulting from STIs, and sexual dysfunction. The sexual activities of women in commercial sex can be asses through number of clients they receive in a day and according to their typical sexual relation. To get a complete idea on sexual behavior of trafficked women it has been asked some question during the interviews.

The information collected on number of clients received in a day by the women shows that in general women receives five to eight clients per day, and as well as there were women who had physical relation with more than eight clients per day.

The study found that there is a differential characteristic on receiving of clients by women. It has found from the interviews that as the age of the women increase the number of clients per day decrease. It is because of preference of clients as it has cited earlier to this discussion. Similarly, the clients also do not prefer the women who were working since many years in the brothel; it is because the client thinks that woman working as prostitute for a long time may have been infected by diseases. Also a customer confessed „...if I want to eat a fruit, I should eat it before it ripen....”.

Apart from the above, in order to perceive the sexual activities of trafficked women I have asked some questions like whether they use condom during their sexual relation. The study found that, women are seldom use condom. Because, it is pimp who obligate them to had sex without condom with an intention to earn more money. When woman has sex without condom, the client pays more money. As this an ordered for women it is impossible to negotiate with client to use the condom. Moreover, the sexual practices by these women indicated that they were practicing a wide range of sexual activities at a time as per as demand of clients. Women were said, frequently (every day) they practices vaginal and oral & vaginal sex with clients. Whereas there were women who indicated that occasionally practices anal sex with clients and in very rarely some clients demands both anal and vaginal sex.

Health consequences

The severity of violence, the environment where these women are living with their sexual behavior can be assess from the unwanted pregnancy, forced abortion and suffering diseases. Out of total twenty women interviewed, 17 were exposed to unwanted pregnancy and were gone for abortion. Among them eleven women reported that at least one time they had abortion after their trafficking, whereas six women had gone for abortion two times and more than two times. During my conversation with women it is found that in very few cases women performs the abortion in clinic; it happened only when the madam came to know about the pregnancy in a very later stage. While in other cases, women were reported that, when their madam came to know about their pregnancy after two or three weeks she gave some medicines and few days after they lost their baby.

The precarious living environment, deficient in nutrition, insufficient physical rest and intense physical and psychological violence results the illness and suffering among the trafficked women. The most common health problem among the trafficked women is fever, backache, and sleep disorder. Some women indicated that they have irregular menstruation, stomach and back pain during menstruation, some have heavy bleeding during menstruation, pain during intercourse, bleeding after intercourse, lower abdominal pain, abnormal vaginal discharge and burning

sensation while urine pass. Thus, obtained result indicates that trafficked women are facing a serious health threat.

In earlier discussion, we have seen that use of condom is very minimal and they are working in a very subhuman condition. They do not have access to good medical facilities, if they have any health problem, madam is the only indicate person who take them to clinic (which are located near the brothel). As far as the information obtained during the field work is concerned, most of these clinics are fake one. There are numerous drug stores located near to brothel, where they sells imitation of many medicines as well as medicine with expire dates in a cheaper price. If a woman report to madam about her health problem, first madam gives some kind of medicine and in the case of emergency she takes them to clinic. But, before going to clinic, madam used to tell them not give any identification and also threaten not to mention anything to doctor. After returning from the clinic, madam never show the bill that how much she spent in clinic and just mention to woman she spent a lot of money and asked her to repay by taking more clients. The poor women accept what madam tell as they do not have other option.

Discussion

The above discussion give a vision that no one in Mexico could be more vulnerable to sexual violence than the women pushed into trafficking. It has been suggested throughout this study, the health consequences are commonly severe and long-lasting among trafficked women. The sexual violence and exploitation at different stages of their life cycle leaves these women in a very slavery like condition. Many of them accepted it as they do not have any other options go away, whereas some women wish to escape or suicide.

The trafficked women in Mexico are in serious problem in every aspect. Not only do they run serious risks of physical and sexual violence, but they have also been stigmatized as carrying the main responsibility for the spreading of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. Basically, these women' ability to protect themselves from STDs and HIV/AIDS is drastically weakened by the threat of madam's violence. The kinds of violence trafficked women are facing are resulting the risk for women by exposing them to forced and unprotected sex. Their ability to negotiate condom use by their male partners is inversely related to the extent or degree of abuse in their relationship.

Though, the result of this study cannot be a representative study in Monterrey city because of its sample size, but this study has documented the level of sexual and physical violence against the trafficked women and their consequences in physical, sexual and mental health conditions. On the other hand, trafficking of women is now an issue of global dimensions which requiring an urgent and

concerted response. The gravity of the situation has sent shocks waves in Mexican society due to the AIDS pandemic. A comprehensive approach is essential to address the economic, social and political aspects of women trafficking and also it is necessary to deal with the perpetrators, as well as to assist the victim of trafficking in Mexico.

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