Review Paper

The ‘dirty downside’ of global sporting events: focus on human trafficking for sexual exploitation

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Human trafficking is as complex human rights and public health issue. The issue of human trafficking for sexual exploitation at large global sporting events has proven to be elusive given the clandestine nature of the industry. This piece examines the issue from a public health perspective.

Study Design: This is a literature review of the ‘most comprehensive’ studies published on the topic.

Methods: A PubMed search was done using MeSH terms ‘human traffickings’ and ‘sex trafficking’ and ‘human rights abuses’. Subheadings included ‘statistics and numerical data’, ‘legislation and jurisprudence’, ‘prevention and control’, and ‘therapy’. Only papers published in English were reviewed.

Results: The search showed that very few well-designed empirical studies have been conducted on the topic and only one pertinent systematic review was identified. Findings show a high prevalence of physical violence among those trafficked compared to non-trafficked women. Sexually transmitted infections and HIV AIDS are prevalent and preventive care is virtually non-existent.

Conclusion: Quantifying human trafficking for sexual exploitation at large global sporting events has proven to be elusive given the clandestine nature of the industry. This is not to say that human trafficking for sex as well as forced sexual exploitation does not occur. It almost certainly exists, but to what extent is the big question. It is a hidden problem on a global scale in plain view with tremendous public health implications.

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Introduction

Large, global sporting events such as the Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup Tournaments, and the U.S. Super Bowl confer advantages as well as disadvantages to the host nation and host city. For the host nation, the global media exposure of an event allows both the country and the host city to improve their identity and image to international markets. Such events are a way to showcase the country and attract foreign investments and trade opportunities. Investment in the local economy acts as a catalyst or stimulus for urban regeneration, business growth, and employment opportunities, and the influx of tourists are a further boost to the economy, at least in...
the short-term. The direct, short-term economic, social, and cultural benefits to the host city and country are viewed as outweighing the potential disadvantages that include security concerns and, perhaps more importantly, long-term financial costs. Hosting such events is a huge financial gamble, and more often than not the host nation and host city will be saddled with substantial debt.

The media hype surrounding the lead-up to the Games naturally focuses on the host city, the athletes, and the social-cultural offerings. However, the ‘dirty downside’ of these sporting events, such as worker abuse, corruption, and fraud, is often ignored. Further, concerns have been raised that large sporting events are magnets for the sex industry, notably human trafficking for sexual exploitation.

The sex industry, which includes sex work, strip clubs, escort services, adult and child pornography, is a multibillion international business. An undefined component of the industry is related to human trafficking for sexual exploitation. According to a report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Albania, Belarus, Bulgaria, China, Moldova, Nigeria, and Thailand are the major places from where girls and women are trafficked, known as ‘source’ countries. The most common destinations for victims of human trafficking are Belgium, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Thailand, Turkey and the United States. The illegal trade in humans is presumed to be one of the fastest-growing businesses of organized crime and the third-largest criminal enterprise in the world. Sex trafficking is illegal, widespread, and very lucrative for the trafficking agents, estimated to generate $12 billion a year.

Human trafficking is as complex human rights and public health issue (see Box 1 for global guidelines for defining human trafficking). There is an important distinction between human sex trafficking and sex work (e.g., the sale of sex between two consenting adults where sex work is seen as work not involving coerced prostitutes). Victims of sex trafficking are not the same as voluntary sex workers. Sex work may be legal or illegal, depending on the local and national law, but sex trafficking is always illegal and always involves force, fraud, and coercion.

Whereas with sex work, the individuals are generally aware of the type of work in which they will participate (implies voluntary involvement); with sex trafficking, the individual is a victim who almost always is unaware of the type of work required and is being held against her will (implies involuntary involvement). Sex workers are paid, but sex trafficked individuals are most likely not paid and are forced to pay off their ‘debts’. Forced sex, forced prostitution, sexual slavery, for example, are examples of involuntary engagement in the sex industry. Victims are given a daily quota, which if they do not meet will result in physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Traffickers use force/violence, drugs, emotional tactics, and financial methods to control their victims.

Whereas some sex workers work independently or with a pimp, individuals who are sex trafficked always have a pimp overseeing their activity. As used herein, ‘pimp’ refers to an individual (pimp if male, or a madam if female) who is an agent for sex workers who collects part of their earnings. The procurer may receive this money in return for advertising services and/or providing physical protection. Pimps and madams, legally known as procurers, can be arrested and charged with pandering; however, as with sex work, the legality of certain actions of a madam or a pimp vary from one region to the next.

This review examines involuntary engagement in the sex industry and its implications not only for the individual but also for Public Health. Trying to get a handle on the extent of the issue is problematic given the clandestine nature of the business. There are few studies that address the issue of human trafficking, and the majority of these studies have serious methodological flaws. That being said, a literature search was conducted to better understand the scope of the problem with a particular focus on human trafficking at large sporting events.

**Methods**

A PubMed search was conducted using MeSH terms ‘human traffickings’ and ‘sex trafficking’ and ‘human rights abuses’. Subheadings included ‘statistics and numerical data’, ‘legislation and jurisprudence’, ‘prevention and control’, and ‘therapy’. The authors selected those studies that focused on the health and/or public health aspects of human trafficking for sex. Only papers published in English were reviewed. The search showed that very few well-designed empirical studies have been conducted on the topic. Among several small-scale studies, one pertinent systematic review was found on the subject.

**Results**

**Public health issues**

Whether a female enters the sex industry by choice or by force, fraud or coercion (as in the case of trafficking), the
potential for harm to her physical and mental well-being and the potential harm to the male who engages in sex with her should be more than sufficient to require action if only from a public health perspective. After all, the focus of a public health intervention is to prevent and manage diseases, injuries and other health conditions through surveillance of cases and the promotion of healthy behaviors, communities and environments.

From a public health perspective, diseases including tuberculosis (TB), sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV AIDS are prevalent among victims of human trafficking, and, as such, have potentially large implications for society at large. Men who engage in unprotected sexual relations with women and girls who have been trafficked for sex run the risk of contracting STIs, TB, and other infectious diseases as well as spreading disease among family members and the public-at-large. Further, because the overwhelming majority of trafficked women and girls do not receive timely access to health care and because preventive care is virtually non-existent, by the time they are seen by a health professional their health problems are at a more serious stage. When medical care is sought, it is more likely than not to be provided by an un-qualified individual hired by the trafficker or pimp.

The paucity of data on the subject compromises the ability to ascertain the extent of individuals’ health problems. Most of the published studies are based on case records or from self-reported accounts of victims who sought treatment. Selection bias and recall bias must be taken into account when reading these studies. Not every female who is trafficked will share her story. Yet, of the few studies that have been conducted, a pattern emerges that paints a sombre picture of the psychological and physical abuse victims of human trafficking experience.

Physical and sexual violence and abuse among individuals who are trafficked are widespread. A European Union study of women trafficked for sex found that 95% had been violently assaulted or coerced into a sex act. This nine-country study (Canada, Colombia, Germany, Mexico, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, United States, and Zambia) also found that the overwhelming majority of women trafficked for sex had been physically assaulted, and 63% were raped before being sold for sex. Rapes (including gang rapes) are used as a means of intimidation; they also greatly increase the risk of the woman becoming infected with STIs and HIV through vaginal trauma and lacerations. Globally, women involved in sex work suffer a disproportionate burden of HIV. The use of illicit drugs (voluntarily or involuntarily) has been associated with increases in HIV prevalence due to the dual risks from unprotected sex and needle sharing.

In addition, the psychological impact on the individual is manifested by depression, drug addiction, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide ideation, and a multitude of other somatic symptoms. An unknown proportion of females who have been trafficked for sex are drugged as a form of control, and many become substance abusers. Psychological violence is compounded by the loss of control over one’s life, physical isolation, as well as the reality of being trafficked for sex. A study that queried healthcare providers about their experiences working with victims of trafficking reported that providers found that victims had high levels of fear, more severe trauma, and greater health needs than other victims of crime. The general consensus among the providers was that victims would need long-term treatment from an interdisciplinary team of health professionals working together to address the multitude of health problems including treatment of physical and psychiatric trauma, sexually transmitted infections, and gynecological problems.

A 2012 systematic review helps shed light on the prevalence of physical, mental, and sexual health of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation it is important to understand the difficulties inherent in such reviews. Studies use different methodologies in quantifying outcomes thus making comparisons difficult, and the heterogeneity in studies’ definition of ‘human trafficking’ also reduces the comparability of the findings. That being said, the systematic review identified 19 studies that met the inclusion criteria. Key findings show a high prevalence of physical violence among those trafficked compared to non-trafficked women. Regarding physical health, the most common physical symptoms reported by those who were trafficked include headaches, fatigue, dizziness, back and stomach pain, and memory problems. The risk of HIV infection was quite high among this cohort at all ages, but was significantly increased among women who had been trafficked at age 14 or younger as compared to women who had been trafficked at age 18 or older (OR 3.42; 95% CI 1.15–7.75).

**Box 2**

**Common health issues seen in victims of human trafficking.**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical health:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chronic pain syndromes (including headaches, chest pain, back pain, unspecified pain); gastrointestinal problems; eye problems; dental problems; malnourishment; bruises, scars, and other signs of physical abuse.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acute physical injuries:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fractures; soft tissue injuries; lacerations; intracranial bleeding.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Gynecological conditions:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pelvic pain; pelvic inflammatory diseases; rectal trauma; urinary difficulties; abscesses and fistulas; dysmenorrhea; urethral damage and urinary incontinence; pregnancy; infertility; forced abortion.</td>
</tr>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Infectious diseases:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexually transmitted diseases (gonorrhea, syphilis, chlamydia, herpes, HPV); HIV AIDS; tuberculosis.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Mental health:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Depression; anxiety; post-traumatic stress; substance abuse addiction; disorientation; phobia/panic disorders; insomnia; helplessness; shock; suicide ideation; poor self-esteem.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Box 2** shows common health problems reported among victims of human trafficking. It must be acknowledged that data on the prevalence of HIV infection were available only from studies conducted in India and Nepal, and only one study used a validated diagnostic instrument to assess mental health disorders.

**Discussion**

**Trafficking for sex at large international sporting events**

While human trafficking is a global problem, there have been questions raised about an increase in sex trafficking at large global sporting events. With the influx of tens of thousands of attendees at such events, concern is that the influx of attendees would contribute to heightened demand for sexual services. In an effort to ascertain the link between trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation with sporting events over the past decade, the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) as well as other organizations found no evidence of an increase in forced sex work neither at the 2004 Athens Olympic and Paralympic Games nor at the 2006 Germany FIFA World Cup. Sex work is legal in Greece and Germany, but there was no evidence that sex trafficking drastically increased during these sporting events.

China, both a source and destination country for trafficking for sexual exploitation, hosted the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2008. There was concern that there would be little effort to curb or prevent human trafficking for sexual exploitation despite the fact that sex work is criminalized in China.

While the Chinese government included combating sex work in the promises it made in order to secure the Games, there is no evidence that the government took any definitive measures to specifically address sex trafficking. The Chinese sex industry thrives partly because of the tacit approval by authorities. There are no reports available about sex trafficking at the 2008 Beijing Games, however, this does not imply that sex trafficking did not occur. Indeed, the lax enforcement of sex work policies in China probably enabled sex trafficking to go undetected.

As South Africa prepared to host the 2010 FIFA World Cup, concerns were raised over HIV transmission and human sex trafficking among sex workers. Sex work is a criminal offence in South Africa; yet, it exists. Richter et al. conducted a cross-sectional study to assess whether changes occurred in the demand and supply of paid sex during the 2010 South Africa World Cup. Their findings showed no major increases in the demand or supply of paid sex during the 2010 South Africa World Cup.

However, as was the case in China, the lack of reports on sex trafficking does not imply that sex trafficking did not occur.

Vancouver hosted the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Buying and selling sex is not illegal in Canada; however, brothels as well as advertising and communicating for sexual services were contrary to Canadian law at the time. Vancouver is known to be a destination for human trafficking (primarily from Asia). It also has one of the most deprived areas in North America, the Downtown Eastside (DTES), which is rife with street and survival sex workers, and the current Canadian public health policy of harm reduction is not considered by health and law enforcement officials to be effective for the sex workers of the city. No evidence of international sex trafficking was documented during or after the Games probably because there was an absence of a centralized strategic plan by the national and city governments to address the issue. Oddly, the central government agency tasked with combating international human trafficking did not focus on the Olympics, and, ironically, the office was closed just after the Olympic Games due to budget cuts.

In the United Kingdom, sex work, as defined by the exchange of sexual services for money, is legal, but soliciting in a public place, ‘kerb crawling’, owning or managing a brothel, pimping and pandering are illegal. It also is an offence to pay for sex with a sex worker who has been ‘subjected to force’, and clients can be prosecuted even if they didn’t know the sex worker was forced into providing a sexual act. There was a lot of hype surrounding sex trafficking at the 2012 London Olympic and Paralympic Games; the media spin focused on linking an increase in demand for sex with an increase in sex trafficking. However, this proved to be unfounded.

A paucity of evidence, however, does not imply that sex trafficking did not occur, as it exists ‘underground’ and is difficult to measure effectively.

Russia, a major source country for globally trafficked women, hosted the 2014 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Sochi. Sex work, while illegal in Russia, it is not considered as a major offence. The Russian government has been criticized by international and local Non-governmental Organizations (NGO’s) for not doing enough to combat trafficking; e.g., not complying with the minimum standards for eliminating it, including reducing the demand for commercial sex. Thus, concerns about sex trafficking at the Sochi Games were probably well-founded. Given the difficulty in documenting the extent of the problem, as is clearly evident from past large international sporting events, it is unlikely that there will be any chance of getting accurate statistics for the Sochi Games especially since the Russian government did not develop a trafficking awareness campaign in advance of the Games.

From a public health perspective, the Russian government is conducting the first nationwide survey on the spread of HIV among gay men and sex workers, cohorts considered ‘risk groups’ as well as being marginalized in Russian society. Russia now has more registered HIV cases than the U.S. despite having less than half the population. However, the budget for AIDS prevention has been reduced by half, supposedly for ideological reasons given the societal stigma associated with the groups identified as at risk.

In contrast to the above, the United States Super Bowl, the largest annual sporting event in the United States, has been labeled the ‘single largest magnet for sex trafficking, child sex work in the U.S. and possibly the world’. The scale of sex work at the last few Super Bowls was described by government agents as ‘incredible’. For example, when Dallas, TX hosted the Super Bowl in 2010 there was a 136% increase in the number of online advertisements for female escort services in the adult section of Dallas Backpages classifieds. Although sex work is illegal in the United States (with the exception of Nevada, which is the only state to allow legal sex work in the form of regulated brothels), human trafficking for sex is an...
acknowledged problem, and the Super Bowl is considered just the tip of the iceberg.

Brazil, host to both the 2014 FIFA World Cup (multiple venues around the country) and the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, presents an interesting case. Brazil is a known destination for international sex tourism, and sex work is legal although brothels are illegal. In Brazil, there is an environment of tolerance of violence. Sexual violence is the second most reported crime against children in Brazil with most of the victims between the age of 10 and 14.21 Fortaleza, the capital of Ceara state and one of the sites for the World Cup, for example, was closely watched because this city has the reputation as the country’s capital of sex tourism and the sexual exploitation of children.22 United Kingdom charity, Happy Child International, works in Brazil and has reported that children as young as 11 or 12 were being trafficked in preparation for the World Cup. Prior to the Games, Fortaleza’s toll-free hotline received more complaints about crimes against children than in previous months.23

In addition, there is concern that there might be resurgence in the incidence of HIV AIDS during and after the sporting events. Brazil’s response to the HIV AIDS epidemic is well known; it was one of the first countries to implement free and universal access to highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART), as well as array of prevention strategies. However, sex workers in Brazil have a much higher risk of acquiring HIV infection compared to the general population, among which HIV prevalence has been relatively low (~0.6%).24

Brazil’s National Health System makes access to health a fundamental right and a duty of the State to reduce disease and other health problems irrespective of background or social status. That being said, Brazil does not regulate sex work and there are no mandatory health checks for these individuals. The Brazilian Network of Prostitutes, a national network of more than 30 organizations has a history of partnership working with the Ministry of Health to design and implement HIV prevention projects including access to health services and increasing the capacity of sex worker organizations. Involuntary sex workers, such as those trafficked for sexual exploitation, however, fall through the cracks despite being at high risk for disease.

In preparation for the Games, Brazil was actively implementing an aggressive program to ‘clean up’ Rio’s image as a sex tourism destination. However, the concern among international NGOs and local support service organizations is that this ‘sanitation drive’ by the authorities would not eradicate the demand for commercial sex. Rather, it would force the sex workers further into the shadows, thus making the environment less safe and more open to criminal control.

Legislation and jurisprudence

The Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, the U.S. Government’s principal diplomatic tool to engage foreign governments on human trafficking,25 is the world’s most comprehensive resource of governmental anti-human trafficking efforts documenting the nature and scope of trafficking in persons and the broad range of governmental actions to confront the problem. Additionally, the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), an organization of over 100 non-governmental organizations, works to promote rights of women migrant workers and trafficked persons, advocates for the incorporation of Human Rights Standards in all anti-trafficking initiatives, including in the implementation of the Trafficking Protocol, Supplementary to the UN Convention on Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Protocol).26 While their efforts are helpful in trying to document the scope of the problem, in reality, human trafficking for sexual exploitation is an international hidden problem in plain view.

In response to the growing concern of human trafficking for sex in the United States Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, which created the first comprehensive federal law to address trafficking (enforced by the FBI and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agencies). In 2001, the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons was established within the State Department to specifically address human trafficking and exploitation. And, many jurisdictions created human trafficking task forces to address the problem. Yet, the situation persists and those involved in human trafficking are rarely caught.

In an effort to address the growing problem of international human trafficking Rep. Ed Royce (R-CA), Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, introduced H.R. 3344, the Fraudulent Overseas Recruitment and Trafficking Elimination (FORTE) Act of 2013 for consideration. Among other things, the legislation would require overseas labor recruiters to provide detailed employment information to avoid the bait-and-switch into slave labor or sexual slavery once individuals they enter the U.S. Only time will tell if this legislation will actually make a difference.

Regarding promoting a research agenda, the clandestine nature of human trafficking makes it quite challenging not only to quantify the extent of the problem, but also to design research studies to investigate the impact on those trafficked. That being said, it would be most helpful if a common definition of human trafficking for sexual exploitation could be agreed upon. This would help ensure comparability among studies. Further, encouraging GAATW to conduct descriptive surveys among those trafficked would not only help document physical and mental health problems among those trafficked for sexual exploitation, but also help understand better the routes of trafficking; e.g., how the individuals ended up as forced workers the sex industry. It would also be useful if the WHO convened a high-level conference to discuss how governments, NGOs, and other interested parties (including researchers) could work together, to pool data, to quantify the extent of the problem. Small, descriptive studies rarely present the full picture and are prone to methodological problems.

Conclusion

Quantifying human trafficking for sexual exploitation at large global sporting events is very difficult due to the clandestine nature of the business. This is not to say that human trafficking for sex as well as forced sexual exploitation does not occur. It almost certainly exists, but to what extent is the big question. What is undeniable is that women and girls who...
have been trafficked for sex are victims many times over. They have a much higher risk of developing serious psychological and physical medical conditions, in some cases life-threatening diseases, and serve as vessels for the spread of infections. They are forced into a life that probably all of them would not have chosen had they had a choice. They are physically and mentally victimized by the nature of their ‘job’. Host governments and Public Health Ministries should, however, have a ‘game plan’ in place before the sporting event take place, one to minimize the potential for spread of disease if only for public health prevention reasons, and also to maximize the likelihood that sex trafficking victims are identified and then provided necessary medical care and protection from those who trafficked them in the first place.

Author statement

Ethical approval

IRB approval was not necessary, as this was a literature review.

Funding

No funding was requested for this review.

Competing interests

Neither author has any competing interests or conflicts to declare.

REFERENCES

14. Ibid.