

**“VIOLENCE IS COMMON AND A DAILY EVENT; IN THIS PLACE HER
DOG HAS MORE RESPECT THAN US”: A STUDY ON CYCLE OF VIOLENCE
FACED BY WOMEN IN MEXICO¹**

ARUN KUMAR ACHARYA

Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales

Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León,

Av. Lázaro Cárdenas Ote. y Paseo de la Reforma S/N,

Campus Mederos C.P. 64930,

Monterrey, N.L. Mexico

Email: acharya_77@yahoo.com

JOSE JUAN CERVANTES NIÑO

Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales

Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León

Email: yare95@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper sets out to explore the violence against women is a new form *femicide* taking into consideration the case of trafficked women. Once women arrived at their destination, suffer various kinds of never-ending violence and exploitation. Thus, in this article we have defined and demonstrated how the trafficking of women constitutes a new form of “*femicide*”. The analytical section of the paper is based on interviews with one hundred and ten trafficked women in Mexico. The results indicate that trafficked women are experiencing a wide range of physical and sexual violence, where they face a constant threat to life.

Keywords: Violence against women, Sexual exploitation, Trafficking, Femicide and Mexico

Introduction

Violence against women causes pain, disability and death to an untold number of individuals every day, in every country in the world (Bloom, 2008). Violence against women

was declared to be a violation of human rights by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1993, in its Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. The UN Declaration defined violence against women as including physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family and general community, which is perpetrated or condoned by the state, and includes traditional practices such as child marriage and female genital cutting/mutilation. Violence strikes women from all kinds of backgrounds and of all ages and it can happen at work, in the street, or at home under different form such as: dating violence, domestic and intimate partner violence, emotional abuse, human trafficking², same-sex relationship violence, sexual assault and abuse, stalking, violence against immigrant and refugee women, violence against women at work and violence against women with disabilities.

Trafficking in women is synonymous with violence. Violence and threats of violence are common forms of coercion employed against trafficked women. Rape and other forms of sexual violence are often used to break trafficked women physically, mentally and emotionally to obtain their enforced compliance in situations of forced labour and slavery-like practices. Sexual violence is also used to condition trafficked women for forced sexual exploitation³. The majority of victims are women and girls trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation. However, recent data indicate that there are also significant numbers of human beings trafficked for other forms of exploitation. These include labour exploitation in domestic work, agriculture, construction, small manufacturing and other occupations⁴.

Human trafficking, especially the trafficking of women and girls, is a reflection of many of the complex social issues that global society is facing today. Recently, the growing concern about violence against women worldwide has put “trafficking” on the international agenda, and its connection with the sex industry, forced and exploitative labour, HIV/AIDS and others forms of human rights violations has added urgency to global anti-trafficking efforts (Huda, 2006). Research indicates that social and economic inequality between and within countries has led the trafficking of women to become a rapidly expanding global

¹ This research was funded by the National Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT), Mexico. Project No. CB-2007/83065.

² The UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, defined *trafficking in persons* as: recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring 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 labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

³ Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequence, Radhika Coomaraswamy, on trafficking in women, women’s migration and violence against women, E/CN.4/2000/68.

⁴ Report of the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, E/CN.4/2005/71.

industry. Women trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation, are at serious risk of unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and physical and sexual violence (ICWAD Trafficking Facts, 2004).

In the last two decades, the focus of research in Mexico has shifted towards an understanding of the heterogeneity of those involved in the sex industry, but to date it is difficult to tell the exact number of women being trafficked into the prostitution business. There is evidence regarding numbers involved in prostitution, but it is complicated to work out which women have been trafficked. Teresa Ulloa, President of the Regional Coalition Against the Trafficking of Women and Children in Latin America and the Caribbean, has stated that every day 400 women enter into prostitution (this figure includes trafficked and non-trafficked women) in Mexico City, of whom 80 per cent do so against their will (González, 2003).

In another study, Acharya and Stevaneto (2005) found that every year nearly 10,000 young girls and women are trafficked within Mexico to six different Mexican cities (Cancun, Acapulco, Mexico City, Ciudad Juarez, Tijuana and Monterrey) for the purpose of sexual exploitation. The same study also underlines that in Mexico, of every ten trafficked women seven are trafficked inside the country and three are taken outside the country.

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 becomes a 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 and 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 her study Lagarde (2001) defined gender-based violence as a politics of patriarchal domination over sex and sexuality and termed it a kind of *femicide* (*feminicidio* in Spanish). According to her, femicide is *violence against women, and it occurs when historical conditions generate social practices which have negative effects on the integrity, health, liberty and life of women.*

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 call on states

to pursue a '*policy of eliminating violence against women*'. We may 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 and forced pregnancy within the definition of crimes against humanity and war crimes; and the Beijing review (Beijing+10), which called for the criminalization of violence against women on the basis of racial grounds, included the trafficking of women and girls for the first time and stated that trafficked women were exposed to multiple forms of discrimination, exploitation and xenophobia⁵. Nevertheless, up until now it has not been possible to observe any effective results. On the contrary, the number of victims of gender-based violence, such as the trafficking of women for the purpose of sexual exploitation, is constantly growing (Lagarde, 2001, UNFPA, 2005, WHO, 2005).

Thus, with the above discussion in mind, this paper sets out to explore and document how trafficked women, once they reached their destination, experience various kinds of never-ending violence and exploitation. The article has three specific objectives: firstly to analyze the socio-demographic profile of trafficked women, secondly to investigate the major causes of violence faced by trafficked women in Mexico, and finally to examine and develop a model and explain how trafficked women become trapped in a cycle of violence.

Research Methodology

Because trafficked women are treated as hidden population, an appropriate and flexible methodology was followed during the fieldwork. To locate trafficked women, we first went to the downtown area of the city, where the brothels are located. We entered a brothel and talked with a woman. Later we paid her 300 pesos (US\$30) and took her to a private room to talk more personally. We gave her details related to our project and asked her to find trafficked women who were working in the same brothel and in nearby ones. At the beginning she declined to help, but after regular interaction she agreed to co-operate with us by locating trafficked women for a payment of 100 pesos per woman located (US\$10). Whenever she had obtained information and arranged an interview, she would call us.

After receiving the information we would go directly to the indicated woman, produce an ID and ask her for an interview. As all brothels are under constant surveillance by

⁵<http://www.unescap.org/esid/GAD/Issues/Beijing%2B10/ARES59166Trafficking%20WomGirls.pdf>, consulted on April 5, 2012.

pimps and traffickers, it is not possible to talk with a woman for a long time in front of all the observers. We would therefore pay whatever amount was asked and take the woman to a private room inside the brothel. This method was also adopted in order to keep our identity hidden from the pimp and the traffickers. Once inside the room we would proceed with the interview.

At the start of these interviews we would invite the women concerned to come to where we were staying or to another hotel or restaurant, but they always responded in the negative. They used to tell us: “ ... *this is our area; it is not possible for us to go out from this place, because madrina (the madam) does not permit us to work in other places*” Since the women were not allowed to leave the brothel, we acted like “clients”. Once we were inside the private room, we would interview them for around 30 minutes. After completing an interview, we would also request the woman to help us find other trafficked women like her. With the help of these women, we constructed a chain, discovered other trafficked women and ultimately interviewed 110 women in Mexico (70 in Mexico City and 40 in Monterrey) during 2002-2005 and 2008-2011.

Trafficked Women as “Sexual” Objects

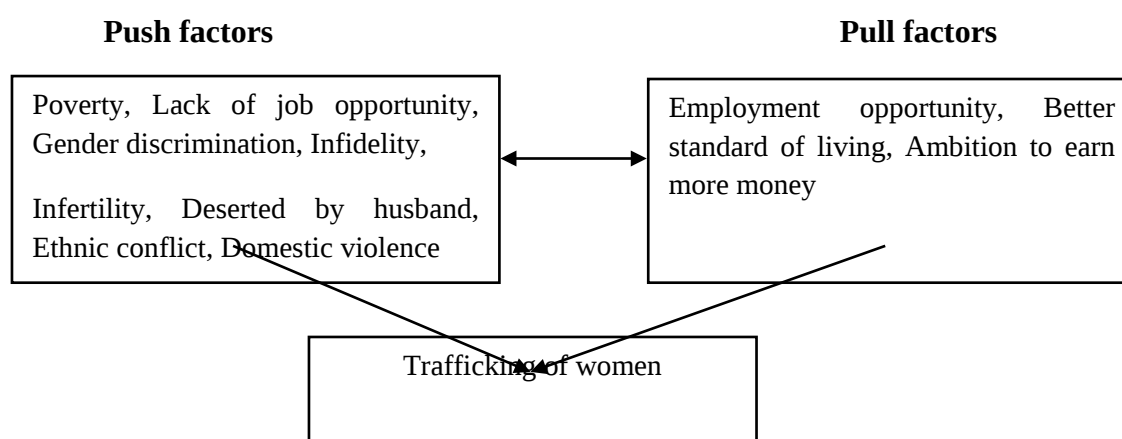
Taylor and Jamieson (1999) state that the sex industry like other industries, operates on the basis of supply and demand. According to this study, trafficked women are treated as a sexual object. Pimps buy them on the basis of certain features of the women and keep them in a brothel until there is a demand for them. Our study explored the fact that trafficked women in Mexico were strikingly young; out of the 110 women interviewed, 93 were less than 20 years old and the rest were between 20 and 25 years old.

When we analyzed the marital status of the trafficked women, around 87 women were unmarried; 17 women were single mothers but not currently living with their children, and only 6 women were married but not living with their husbands. In addition, among the other characteristics of trafficked women, it could be clearly seen that 78 of the women belonged to the *mestizo* ethnic group (Spanish mixed-race) while the rest were indigenous. We observed that *mestizo* women were very much preferred due to their lighter skin colour.

To turn now to some other aspects, the trafficking of women in Mexico is a “*multi-factorial phenomenon*”. During the interviews women cited a wide range of factors as reasons why they had fallen victim to a trafficking network. On the basis of their answers, we have here divided the root causes of trafficking into two factors: Push and Pull factors (see figure 1). Push factors typically include poverty, lack of job opportunities (unemployment), gender-

based discrimination, desertion by husband, ethnic conflict, infertility, infidelity and domestic violence. On the other hand, based on the women's responses, the research found that employment opportunities, the ambition to earn more money, and the better standard of living in Mexican cities and in the United States are the main explanatory pull factors for women who are trafficked in Mexico. It is important to mention that these push and pull factors can be mutually reinforcing and that some of them can also be the consequence of others.

Figure 1 Push and Pull factors in the trafficking of women in Mexico



Once the traffickers have taken women from their place of origin, they usually put them in different intermediary places and give them different kinds of training covering points such as how to perform sexual relation(s), ways of negotiating with clients, and how to dress, as well as other brothel rules and regulations, including not leaving the brothel without the permission of the owner, not talking and giving any personal information or any other information to anybody, and so on.

Information obtained from the fieldwork indicates that the false promise of employment and an exotic life in Mexican cities and in the United States is a common tactic used by traffickers to trap women. When women come to know the truth about the kind of employment they have been recruited for, in most cases they refuse to agree to it. When this happens, the pimp and traffickers use various kind of violence to force them to stay and work in the brothel. Many women said that after they left home their life became a “life of violence”. This kind of violence has a serious impact, above all on women's health.

Violence against Trafficked Women: a New Form of Femicide

It is a simple fact that the overwhelming majority of victims of violence and sexual violence are female. Research into violence against women points to social inequalities in the

distribution of power, authority and control between men and women as factors. In a study of violence against women, Dobash and Dobash (1979, in Barnard, 1993) argue that the motivation for attacks is often centred on the notion of “*keeping a woman in her place*”. Male role socialization incorporates the notion that women are subordinate; hence men should have the right to punish and discipline women (Scully, 1990, Sandy, 1986 and Dobash *et al.*, 1992, in Barnard, 1993). Thus, violence is a *means* by which to dominate and suppress a woman, which we can clearly see in the case of trafficked women. Studies indicate that trafficked women and commercial sex workers experience high levels of violence including, but not limited to, physical assaults, sexual assaults, verbal threats or abuse, and psychological abuse (Lowman, 2000, Raymond, 2004, Acharya and Clark, 2010).

While this new emphasis on the significance of power and suppression in the 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, traffickers and clients. During our interview and analysis process, it was clearly found that the occurrence of both physical and sexual violence at the hands of traffickers and pimps is a commonplace in the lives of these trafficked women. Here we have placed women who were exposed to some kind of physical and sexual violence in three different categories according to the frequency of violence, namely with attacks occurring frequently, occasionally or rarely in the six months prior to the time of interview. These levels are to be interpreted as follows: frequent violence is aggression faced every day, occasional violence is aggression faced once every two weeks and rare violence means attacks faced once a month.

The results show that trafficked women in Mexico face a wide range of frequent violence, including verbal abuse, being locked in a room without food for days, death threats from pimps, being forced to have sex with more than one client at a time and being slapped by both pimps and clients. With occasional violence, the study found that women were beaten with various objects, burnt with cigarettes, raped by pimps, and sometimes pimps put chilli powder into their eyes and vagina. In case of rare violence, pimps tried to burn and stab trafficked women.

Analysis indicates that women face physical and sexual violence every day and that these attacks are sometimes also of an extreme nature and cause severe wounds or injuries to the women concerned. One woman indicated during an interview:

... for us violence is common, it is nothing new, we are habituated to this, here we do not have rights over our body, here we are treated just like an animal, it is *madrina* (madam) who decides everything

for us, when we have to work, with whom we have to work, what to do or not to do, when we have to eat, sleep etc., all these depend on her, we do not have the right to say 'no', if we do not follow her words she just uses her power in many ways, for her our life is nothing, in this place her dog has more respect than us....”

Thus, for women forced to enter the profession, their life is in constant danger. In sum, these kinds of exploitation construct them as victims and in many cases women would prefer to die rather than stay living in such places. As a 17-years-old girl put it:

.... Mi patrona me pega cuando rechazo tener sexo con los clientes. Te comento que una vez me pegaron con un palo en mi cabeza, me sangre mucho, pero no les importó ... me tratan muy mal ... me tratan como objeto ... pienso que la muerte es mejor de este sufrimiento (My madam beats me when I refuse to have sex with clients. I can tell you that once they hit me on the head with a stick, I bled a lot, but they didn't care ... they treat me very badly ... they treat me like an object ... I think death is better than this suffering).

The study also found that once trafficked women had reached their destinations they underwent different stages of violence. Here we have divided violence suffered by women in the post-trafficking situation into three stages. In the study we saw that as a woman's age increases the violence changes. The three stages are (see figure 2):

Stage 1: Sexual-physical violence

Stage 2: Psychological violence

Stage 3: Discrimination and social exclusion

Information and data obtained from the field indicate that women aged below 20 are exposed to an extreme level of sexual and physical exploitation. As they are young, the pimps are intent on earning more money by making them have sex with as many clients as possible in a day (the study found that these women received at least 10-15 clients per day and charged \$100 USD per client). For example, during a discussion a *madrina* (madam) said: “A *jovencita* (young woman) is a golden hen for me. As long as she is young, I have to exploit her as much possible to earn my money. Once she is grown up, clients will not prefer her, so I cannot earn more money”.

Once a woman reaches the age of 20, the sexual exploitation against her reduces significantly. Clients pay less for a woman of this age than for a woman below 20. This results in less financial gain for the owner, so the pimp plans to replace her with some other, younger woman. In order to be able to replace her, the *madrina* embarks on many kinds of

psychological abuse as well as verbal-physical suggestions aimed at making the trafficked woman decide to leave the brothel. In addition, the woman also faces racial discrimination from traffickers and pimps. For example, a woman of twenty-three said:

Now *madrina* does not like me, every day she is scolding me, beating me and discriminating against me by comparison with other younger women, telling me that now I am “una vaca vieja” (old cow), the clients do not like me, whenever I try to do good she is not satisfied with me. I have already worked with her for more than seven years, now where will I go? ... she has already spoiled my body and my life ... I do not know what to do now and where to go”

Trafficked women aged 25 or older who leave the brothel often try to lead a normal life like anyone else in society, but their former profession makes them vulnerable in many ways. As Mexican society is conservative, cultural taboos make the process of social assimilation difficult for them. These former trafficked women experience a wide range of discrimination, such as isolation, since people consider them bad luck. Thus at this stage the women’s suffering (social this time) increases once more, leading many of them to consider suicide, and some return to the brothel as a pimp or as a lower category sex worker.

Figure 2: Violence faced by trafficked women in the post-trafficking situation

Stages	Age	Violence	Type of violence
Stage 1	Below 20	Sexual and physical violence	Rape by traffickers and clients, forced sex with more than one client, beaten with objects, slapped, kicked.
Stage 2	20 to 25	Psychological violence	Verbal abuse, offensive behaviour, insults, isolation, stalking.
Stage 3	Over 25	Discrimination and social exclusion	Not making friendships, isolation, excluded from social and cultural events.

From the above discussion, it is evident that trafficked women are treated as no more than sex objects and that they suffer many kinds of abuse and violence from pimps and

clients. Thus we are looking at severe exploitation and violence and it can be concluded that trafficking is a form of *femicide*.

Forced Sex and Sexual Exploitation: a *Threat to Women's Bodies*

As we have seen from our earlier discussion of trafficked women being regarded as sex objects, it is clear from the analysis that women are forced into sex at any point in time, as well as being forced to accept any number of clients per day. We have analyzed this sexual exploitation by taking into consideration the number of clients received in a day and the typical forms of sexual relations. To get a fuller idea of the sexual behaviour of trafficked women, a number of questions were asked during each interview.

Information collected on the number of clients received in a day by the women shows that in general these women receive around ten clients per day, although there were some women who had physical relations with more than ten clients per day. The study found that there are inverse relationship patterns that dictate the number of clients seen by women. It was found from the interviews that as the age of the woman increases the number of clients per day decreases.

In order to grasp the sexual activities of trafficked women I asked some questions such as whether they used condoms during sexual relations. The study found that the women's clients seldom used condoms because the pimp forced the women to have sex without a condom so that they could earn more money. (When a woman has sex without a condom, the client pays more.) As this was an order imposed on the women it was impossible for them to negotiate with their clients to use a condom. In addition, the sexual practices described by these women indicated that they practised a wide range of sexual activities at a time according to their clients' demands. From interviews it emerged that women were frequently (every day) practising vaginal and oral sex with clients. However, there were some women who indicated that they occasionally practised anal sex with clients, and very rarely some clients demanded both anal and vaginal sex.

Conclusion

In the case of trafficking, it can be clearly observed that women experience a range of violent treatment. From the discussion it can be concluded that these women suffer serious physical, sexual, mental and personality damage, which is a clear example of "*femicide*". The trauma of sexual coercion and assault at different stages of their life cycle leaves many of these women with severe loss of self-esteem and autonomy. This, in turn, means that they do

not always make the best sexual and reproductive health decisions for themselves. Many of them accept victimization as part of being female.

In the interviews conducted for this study, we found that the frequency with which women reported violence was higher than in the data on domestic violence in Mexico. Violence is a means by which the pimps control the sexuality and bodies of trafficked women. This results in women being exposed to the risk of disease by being forced to have unprotected sex. Woman's ability to negotiate condom use by their male partners is inversely related to the extent or degree of abuse in their relationship.

It is important to note that at the current time in Mexico about 153,109 persons (125,783 male and 27,326 female) are living with the deadly HIV virus (CONASIDA, 2011)⁶, and that 97,773 of them have been infected through sexual transmission. Most studies have revealed that there is a pervasive attitude that stigmatizes prostitutes and blames them for the spread of disease and identifies sex workers as a major source of sexually transmitted diseases. This has resulted in prostitution being seen as the cause of disease rather than as the consequence of economic marginalization. Inevitably, it has also helped to draw attention away from male sexual behaviour, and put the onus of disease prevention on women. While much of the literature has focused on the potential of sex workers to infect others with HIV, with them often being regarded as disease transmitters, little has been written about the need to protect sex workers from abuse and disease.

This study provides some documentation regarding the level of sexual and physical violence against trafficked women and underlines the need to address safety for sex workers, who are caught up with issues of legality and stigma. It is likewise imperative that governments take appropriate measures to address the root causes of the problem, including the feminization of poverty and gender inequality, as well as other push factors that encourage young women to fall prey to trafficking networks.

At the present time, the trafficking of women cuts across a variety of social and economic conditions and has become deeply embedded in various cultures around the world, and therefore millions consider it a way of life. This kind of *femicide* rarely results in easily managed consequences that can be addressed with a prescriptive or band-aid approach. Trafficking harms women in insidious ways that create health hazards. The physical and mental health consequences are not a side effect of trafficking, but a central theme. That being so, programmes for victims not only need to encompass advocacy, awareness and shelter but

⁶ http://www.censida.salud.gob.mx/descargas/2011/vih_sidapub31dic2011.pdf

must also focus on psychological and physical health needs and provide education and rehabilitation so that victims can transition back into a normal existence.

Works Cited

- Acharya, Arunkumar and Clark, J. B. "The Health Consequences of Trafficking in Women in Mexico: Findings from the City of Monterrey". *International Review of Sociology*, 20.3 (2010).
- Acharya, Arunkumar and Adriana Salas Stevanato. "Violencia y tráfico de mujeres en México: Una perspectiva de Género". *Estudios Feministas*, vol.13.3 (2005).
- Barnard, Marina A. "Violence and Vulnerability: Conditions of Work for Street Working Prostitutes". *Sociology of Health and Illness*, Vol. 15.5 (1993).
- Bloom, Shelah S. *Violence against Women and Girls: A Compendium of Monitoring and Evaluation Indicators*, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), 2008.
- González, Ramón. *Violencia contra las mujeres deja un millón de víctimas anuales en México*, CIMAC, Mexico, 2003.
- Heise, L., M. Ellsberg and M. Gottemoeller. "Ending Violence against Women". *Population Reports*, Population Information Program, School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland. Series L. 11 (1999).
- Huda, Sigma. "Sex Trafficking in South Asia". *International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics*, Elsevier Ireland. 94 (2006).
- ICWAD Trafficking Facts. "International Commission for Women of African Descent", 2004. Web. 9 August 2011. <www.npcbw.org/newweb/icwad_04_trafficking_facts.htm>.
- International Labour Office. *World of Work: the Magazine of the ILO*, 54 (2005).
- Lagarde, Marcela. *Género y Feminismo: Desarrollo Humano y Democracia (Gender and Feminism: Human Development and Democracy)*. Editorial Horas y Horas (Horas y Horas Publishing House), third edition, Mexico. 25 (2001).
- Lowman, John. "Violence and the Outlaw Status of (Street) Prostitution". *Violence Against Women*, 6. 9 (2000).
- Raymond, Janice. "Prostitution on Demand: Legalizing the Buyers as Sexual Consumers". *Violence Against Women*. 6. 9 (2004).
- Taylor, Ian and Ruth Jamieson. "Sex Trafficking and the Mainstream of Market Culture". *Crime, Law and Social Change*. Kluwer Academic Publishers. 32. 3 (1999).
- United Nations Fund for Population, *United Nations Development Fund for Women and Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women*.

Combating Gender-Based Violence: A Key to Achieving the MDGS, 2005. Web.

8 December 2011.

<http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2005/combating_gbv_en.pdf>.

United Nations Millennium Project. *Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women*. Task Force on Education and Gender Equality, Earthscan, London and Sterling, Virginia. 2005.

World Health Organization. *WHO Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women*, World Health Organization. Geneva, 2005.