



UN Women

Topic 1: The systematic exploitation of women from sexualization to sex work

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Contents

1. Definition of key terms	1
2. Introduction	2
3. Background information	2
4. Timeline of events	4
5. Major countries involved	4
6. UN involvement	5
7. Official documents and treaties about the issue	5
8. Impact of the issue	6
9. Bibliography	6

1. Definition of key terms

Sexualization and Objectification: the systematic process through which women are diminished to their sexual characteristics, often depicted primarily as objects of desire rather than acknowledged as complete individuals with diverse capabilities and identities.

Exploitation: the unfair or unjust use of someone for one's own advantage or profit. In the context of sexual exploitation, it refers to the abuse of a person's sexuality for someone else's gain or benefit: this can include coercive practices, such as sex trafficking, prostitution, and other forms of sexual abuse.

Sex Trafficking: the act of recruiting, transporting, transferring, harboring, through the use of threats, force, or various coercive methods, with the intention of exploiting a woman within the sex industry.

Prostitution: the exchange of sexual services for money or goods. In the context of exploitation, it's important to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary prostitution, as some individuals may enter the sex trade due to coercion, poverty, or lack of alternatives.

Sex Work: the trading of sexual services, performances, or products in exchange for material compensation. This can encompass direct physical interactions between buyers and sellers, as well as indirect forms of sexual stimulation. Such term implies a degree of professionalism and dignity comparable to other professions, especially when in comparison with the term "prostitution."

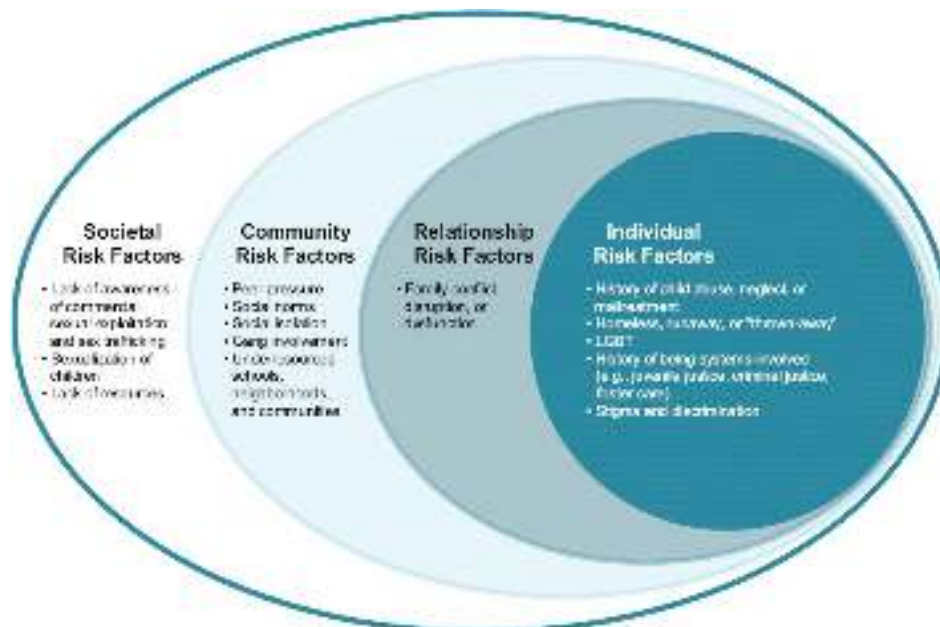
2. Introduction

Sexualization, the objectification of women's bodies for the gratification of others, is identified as a precursor to more severe forms of exploitation, such as involvement in sex work. The exposure of women to gender stereotypes and unrealistic beauty standards at a young age through media, advertising, and cultural expectations contributes to the hypersexualization of women, reinforcing negative stereotypes and normalizing objectification.

Various factors, including social marginalization, limited educational opportunities, and economic disparities, contribute to the transition from sexualization to involvement in sex work. Women, particularly those from marginalized communities, may be compelled or coerced into prostitution for economic survival. Systemic challenges such as unequal pay, limited employment options, and discriminatory practices further push certain women into the informal economy's margins, perpetuating the cycle of exploitation.

In an environment where power dynamics between men and women are unequal due to traditional gender norms, women's autonomy is often underestimated. Those engaged in sex industries face discrimination stemming from industry stigmatization and moralistic stereotypes, restricting their access to social and legal support systems.

The proliferation of human trafficking and the globalization of the sex industry have resulted in a rise in the exploitation of women on a global scale. Transnational criminal networks exploit vulnerabilities in socioeconomic institutions, luring women into abusive situations with false promises of improved job prospects or employment opportunities. Addressing this interconnected web of exploitation requires international collaboration and a comprehensive understanding of the underlying root causes. Combating human trafficking and the exploitation of women necessitates coordinated efforts to dismantle criminal networks, address economic inequalities, and strengthen global frameworks for the protection of human rights.



3. Background information

The issue of women being sexualized and exploited in sex work has deep systemic roots, originating from historical, cultural, economic, and sociological factors.

The historical fabric of human communities unveils the complex and multidimensional nature of

slavery, extending beyond traditional limits. Sexual slavery manifests in various forms, including forced prostitution, exemplified by groups like Zwi Migdal, ritual slavery linked to certain religious practices in regions of Ghana, Togo, and Benin, and individual-owner sexual bondage. Slavery extends beyond overt sexual abuse, as seen in instances like the colonization of the Americas, where non-consensual sexual activities were tragically intertwined with systems initially designed for non-sexual purposes. The interaction between European explorers and Native Americans during this period involved forced labour, driven by financial motives but tainted by widespread non-consensual sexual behaviour.

Concubinage, historically present in certain cultural contexts, serves as a traditional form of sexual slavery, compelling women to a lifetime of servitude. This is notably evident in the practice of concubinage in Islam. In specific cultures, enslaved concubines and their offspring were granted distinct rights and occupied legitimate social positions. The issue underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of historical factors to address and combat the systemic exploitation of women.

Additionally, the issue of large-scale trafficking in women and female children persists, involving their use as concubines, spouses, and prostitutes. Disturbingly, men may sell their wives and children, or heirs may inherit them. Girls may be involuntarily offered in marriage at a young age to considerably older men. In Asia, wealthy men can still purchase concubines, and in both Asia and Latin America, children can be "adopted" by wealthy families in exchange for payment, often leading to domestic labor or sexual exploitation. False advertisements have the potential to lure or abduct wives, concubines, and prostitutes, serving the desires of both male and sometimes female "customers" and providing low-cost slave labour.

End-markets for women have been identified in various locations, including the Ivory Coast, Senegal, Australia, Japan, Puerto Rico, and the Middle East, notably in Lebanon and Kuwait. An alarming example from China in 1989 involved approximately 900 criminal gangs implicated in 3,000 cases of kidnappings of women and children during a month-long police operation. Over three years starting in 1986, around 4,810 women from various parts of the country were trafficked to a relatively affluent region. These women, some as young as 13 or 14, were either purchased, abducted, or deceived by traffickers operating in economically disadvantaged provinces. Subsequently, they were transported hundreds of miles away, showcased in marketplaces, and subjected to auctions, primarily conducted in the northwest and coastal regions.

Contrary to the belief that female trafficking had ceased in 1996, evidence showed that women were still being forced into prostitution in Europe after being transported from underdeveloped nations. According to estimates from the European Parliament's Women's Rights Committee, up to 500,000 women are trafficked into the EU yearly. While some enter the sex industry voluntarily, the majority are kidnapped, sometimes with the assistance of agencies in the entertainment industry and "mail-order bride" scams. Pimps, drug dealers, and threatening "managers" exploit and prey on them.

Between 1990 and 1996, illegal trafficking of women saw a significant increase, nearly doubling in Belgium and tripling in the Netherlands. These countries serve as central hubs for entry into the European Union and transit for women through other nations. Initially, women predominantly originated from Hungary, Poland, and the former Czechoslovakia. However, in more recent times, there has been a shift, with an increasing number arriving from Russia and other former Soviet states.

A concerning trend is the rising number of individuals under the age of 18 subjected to trafficking. The estimated budget for lodging, documentation, and transportation for those involved in these illicit activities ranges from 1,500 to 30,000 euros. The persistence of female trafficking underscores the ongoing challenges and complexities in addressing this grave issue.

4. Timeline of events

Late 1800s: the Industrial Revolution helps to increase the number of sex workers in urban sites and centers. Many women, facing limited economic opportunities, turn to sex work.

Mid-20th Century: World War II contributes to a rise of the number of women engaged in sex work, often linked to military presence in various regions.

1960s-1970s: the feminist movement actively challenges conventional gender roles and brings attention to the issues of objectification and exploitation of women. During this period, discussions and debates surrounding sex work and its potential legalization gain prominence within feminist discourse.

1980s-1990s: the advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic significantly heightens awareness regarding the vulnerabilities faced by sex workers. Notably, organizations such as Amnesty International engage in deliberations over the decriminalization of sex work, aiming to safeguard the rights and well-being of individuals involved in the sex industry.

2000: The United Nations adopts the Palermo Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children.

5. Major countries involved

Thailand:

Thailand faces significant challenges with women being trafficked and exploited, particularly within the travel and tourism sector. The persisting issues of human trafficking and sex tourism underscore the vulnerability women experience in these environments.

India:

India hosts a large sex industry, with women often entering it due to job shortages and financial hardships. The exploitation of marginalized women, forced prostitution, and human trafficking are prevalent issues in the country.

Brazil:

Brazil, especially in locations like Rio de Janeiro and Fortaleza, is recognized as a major hub for sex tourism. Economic inequality and poverty render women more susceptible to exploitation in these areas.

Germany:

Despite the legalization and regulation of prostitution in Germany, concerns persist regarding the mistreatment of women in the legal sex sector. Reports of forced prostitution and human trafficking highlight the challenges associated with the legalized sex industry.

United States:

The sex industry in the United States is extensive and intricate, with numerous reports of human trafficking and exploitation nationwide. Women, particularly those from marginalized groups, may be forced into prostitution, highlighting the challenges within the country.

Russia:

Women trafficked for sexual exploitation often originate from Russia and other former Soviet

states. Economic distress, coupled with organized crime, is a significant factor leading to the trafficking of women to other nations, particularly in Europe and the Middle East.

Cambodia:

Cambodia has faced issues with women being sexually exploited, especially in the context of sex tourism. Vulnerabilities are heightened by poverty, political instability, and a history of conflict, exacerbating challenges for women in the nation.

Lebanon:

There is evidence linking women trafficked for sexual exploitation to Lebanon, particularly Beirut. The complex social and political environment in the country creates conditions favourable to human trafficking and exploitation.

Ivory Coast:

Reports of women being trafficked and exploited have emerged from West Africa, particularly the Ivory Coast. Women in this region are particularly vulnerable due to political unrest and economic challenges, further complicating their situation.

6. UN involvement

The United Nations has made combating sexual exploitation a significant area of focus, incorporating legal provisions within international law to address forced labor, human trafficking, and violence against women. In recent years, both the UN and the Council of Europe (CoE) have started to emphasize the connection between these criminal offenses and the demand for sexual services, highlighting the need for comprehensive efforts to address and prevent sexual exploitation globally.

7. Official documents and treaties about the issue

United Nations Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, 1949: this Convention, commonly known as the "1949 UN Convention", addresses the issue of trafficking in persons and the exploitation of prostitution. It calls on Member States to take measures to suppress this practice and protect the rights of those involved. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b38e23.html>

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1979: it outlines the definition of discrimination against women and establishes a plan for national action to put a stop to it. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995: the Beijing Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women, calls for action to combat violence against women, including human trafficking and exploitation. It emphasizes the need to eliminate stereotypes and harmful practices that contribute to the exploitation of women. <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf>

Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol), 2000: this protocol supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and specifically addresses trafficking

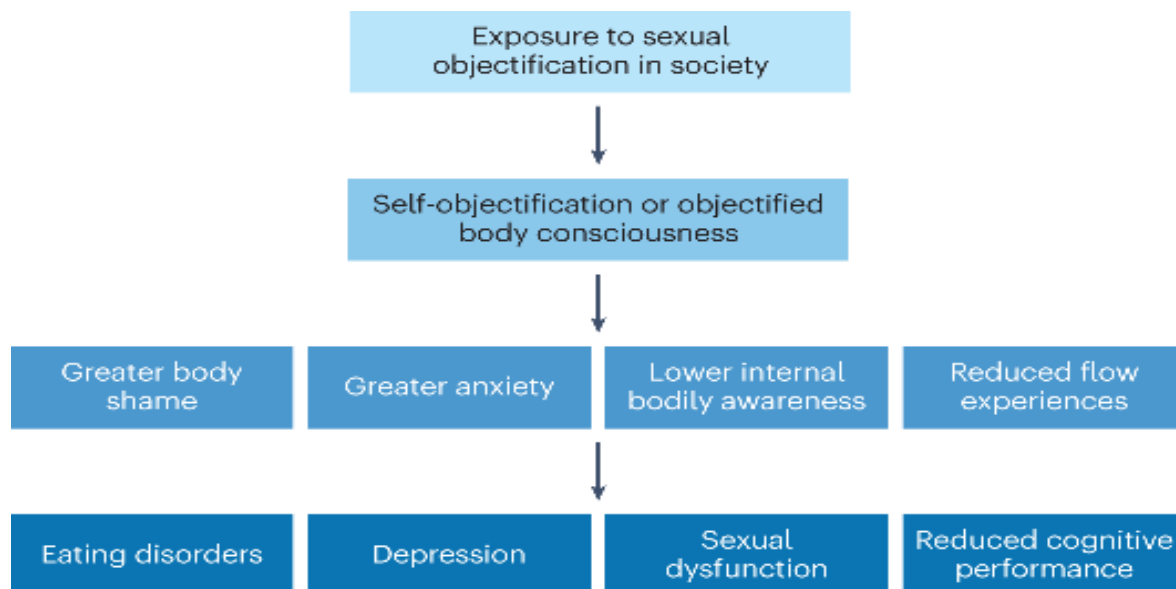
in persons, including women and children for various forms of exploitation, such as sexual exploitation.

<https://www.unhcr.org/media/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons-especially-women-and-children-1>

8. Impact of the issue

Mental Health: Women who have experienced sexual exploitation and human trafficking are at an elevated risk of developing mental health problems, including conditions such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Substance Abuse: Empirical evidence suggests a correlation between the sexual exploitation of women and substance abuse. Victims of sexual exploitation often exhibit a higher likelihood of using drugs compared to alcohol. This connection is particularly pronounced among homeless women and youth, who may be more inclined to exchange sexual services for drugs. Addressing both mental health and substance abuse issues is crucial in providing comprehensive support for survivors of sexual exploitation.



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