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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

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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 global 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.¹ 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.² Sex trafficking is illegal, widespread, and very lucrative for the trafficking agents, estimated to generate \$12 billion a year.^{3,4}

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

Box1

Defining human trafficking.

Source: Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime. UN General Assembly resolution 55/25. New York, NY. 2000.

In November 2000, the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) (also called the Palermo Convention) was adopted by a resolution of the United Nations General Assembly. The Convention included three Protocols, one of which is the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol). The document provides a ‘global language’ for understanding the components of human trafficking and a framework for protection and prosecution, and defines trafficking in persons as the implicit use of threat, force, or other forms of coercion against an individual for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, debt bondage, or slavery. Sex trafficking specifically refers to force, fraud, or coercion as related specifically to the illegal sex trade business (e.g., forced sex work).

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.⁵ 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

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