

# Human Trafficking and Globalization\*

By Ann Jordan

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening up of China, the world has experienced one of the greatest – and quite possibly *the* greatest – migrations of people in history. Millions are migrating worldwide, some out of choice and some out of dire necessity. The numbers are staggering:

- The International Labor Organization estimates that in 1995 there were 89 to 97 million international migrants (including families).<sup>48</sup>
- China alone has almost as many internal migrants as there are people in the United States.
- Experts have estimated that one-third of the population of Moldova has migrated out of the country.
- Organized crime is now trafficking literally thousands of these migrants into slavery, forced labor and servitude all across the globe. They are now even trafficking whole families as they continue to devise new ways to extract wealth from forced labor.

At the end of the Cold War, the struggling economies of the former Soviet Union and China revealed overnight the absolute failures of their socialist governments to provide real jobs. No longer was it feasible for factories to employ five or eight workers to do a job that realistically only required one worker putting in a full eight-hour day. Many excess workers suddenly found themselves without jobs, homes, pensions, medical care, education or any of the other benefits they had come to rely upon in the preceding 50 years.

China tried to control migration by treating rural migrants in the cities as foreigners without rights, while the countries of the former Soviet Union simply did nothing to address the issue. Migrants ended up living on the streets or in overcrowded conditions.

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In fact, as with all governments in countries of origin, these countries had little or no incentive to control outmigration. Outmigration relieved pressure on them to provide jobs for their citizens, and it provided them with a stream of remittances from migrants that frequently constituted their largest source of foreign currency (and which directly contributed to the gross domestic product).

Meanwhile, orthodox structural adjustment policies have exacerbated the problem in many parts of the world. For example, when structural adjustment forced down cocoa prices in Cote d'Ivoire, the small farmers – who lived at the margins themselves – turned to forced labor trafficked in from Mali. Trade liberalization has also in many cases had a devastating impact upon marginal farmers. Mexican farmers contend that for every truckload of cheap U.S. corn that enters Mexico, three Mexicans give up farming and travel north.

A large percentage of these migrant populations first move from rural communities to towns, then to cities and then abroad. At each stage, they become more vulnerable. They find competition for jobs is intense and work for pitifully small wages as day laborers. Meanwhile, others have become rich by organizing themselves into small and large networks to exploit the vulnerability of the migrants in every way possible. The most lucrative niche they fill is in providing a means for migrants to travel to countries in need of workers to take on the underpaid, exploitative “3D” jobs – the dirty, degrading and dangerous unskilled work – that citizens and legal residents in many countries refuse to take.

At the same time, developments in cheap transportation and global communications have facilitated the global movement of people not only out of China and the former Soviet Union, but also out of countries that, in the post-Cold War era, have exploded into violence or seen their economies collapse. Thus, the stage has been set for a huge new industry, and the migrants are the supply, and the unwitting props in a tragedy of enormous proportions.

Meanwhile, on the demand side, the birth rates in the developed world – particularly in Japan and Western Europe – have fallen below the replacement level needed to guarantee a continuing supply of labor, thus leaving those countries with serious unskilled labor shortages. Nonetheless, developed countries are closing their borders, even to the point of closing access to asylum. Western Europe is now called “Fortress Europe” because labor migration laws have closed doors to foreign-born labor and now do not allow enough workers in to meet the labor demand. As borders close, migration routes become more dangerous (such as the Arizona desert) and the smuggling costs increase to the point that many smugglers become traffickers who “sell” their victims or hold them in forced labor in order to recover their high costs.

Nonetheless, migrant workers have become vital to our economy. They continue to enter and take on the 3D jobs, with the result that consumers have access to inexpensive domestic products, and employers have access to an inexpensive labor market. A 2002 study by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University reports that immigrants account for half of all new workers in the U.S., and that



male immigrant workers have been particularly crucial to filling gaps in the supply of male workers.<sup>49</sup> Even if Americans were induced by better wages to take on some of the 3D jobs filled by immigrants, the demand for migrant labor would still be in the millions.

The new “global capitalism” is a selective type of capitalism. It ensures the free movement of goods and capital but denies the free or at least rational movement of labor. Thus, irrational, non-transparent, restrictive immigration laws force people who migrate to escape poverty, civil wars, familial violence or persecution into the hands of criminals who too often are human traffickers.

This situation is perfectly well known to governments in countries of destination, which all claim clean hands regarding labor exploitation and human trafficking. However, administrations at both ends of the political spectrum tolerate the situation through inaction. They fail to develop the policies needed to address this problem, and, tellingly, they do not deport undocumented workers. At most, they prosecute some of the worst cases involving human trafficking, slavery or forced labor – otherwise, the system remains unthreatened. To quote from an ILO report:

The practices of many States of tolerating the presence of migrant workers in irregular status to meet labour needs in certain sectors of the market constitutes a de facto employment policy in which part of the work force becomes a variable which can be reduced or even eliminated (in theory) in periods of economic downturn, through exercise by States of their prerogative to expel foreigners from their territory. In effect, by the same manner that migration policy can be utilized to satisfy labour market needs with foreign labour, deportation or expulsion can be utilized to regulate or even force the return to countries of origin of this temporary labour.<sup>50</sup>

Unfortunately, only a few hundred or thousand traffickers are punished annually. As a result, the law enforcement approach, while necessary, has had no discernible impact upon the number of victims worldwide. Prosecutions alone cannot, in any event, have any significant impact unless there is a simultaneous effort to address the worldwide imbalance in wealth and labor supply and demand. The supply of surplus labor is enormous and, absent a downturn in the economies of the developed world (or increases in birth rates), human trafficking will only continue and perhaps even increase in scope and sophistication. If governments in the United States, Europe, Japan and elsewhere are serious about stopping human trafficking, then they must, at a minimum, take the following five steps:

1. Undertake objective, non-ideological, non-political, fact-based research to document both (a) the role of restrictive immigration policies, limited application of labor laws and depressed wages in countries of destination on the growth of the human trafficking industry, and (b) the realistic need for different types of labor in the future.

2. Develop transparent, rational labor migration policies based upon the measurable need for migrant labor. The policies must ensure a supply of workers who are not vulnerable to abuse and exploitation and who have the same rights as other workers. The recent proposals from Congress and Europe for labor visas that would allow workers to enter for 6-8 months a year to work for one employer or only in one industry are, by definition, drafted solely for the benefit of the employer. They perpetuate the view that immigrants are nothing more than a flexible, fungible resource that is emotionally and physically detached from family and community and not deserving of the same rights as other workers. Labor migration policies must ensure that migrant workers no longer form an underclass of human beings who do not ‘deserve’ the full exercise of their human rights simply because they are migrants.
3. Ensure that all workers receive a living wage so that employers are less able to pit domestic workers against immigrant workers. For example, wages in agriculture have not risen in a decade, driving away Americans who have been replaced by vulnerable migrants who are forced to live in inhumane conditions on substandard wages.
4. Enforce all labor laws strictly. All employers who abuse labor laws intended to protect workers, including migrant workers, should be aggressively penalized and prosecuted for any criminal behavior, including trafficking if they willingly use forced labor.
5. Employ economic assistance for countries of origin in a manner that facilitates the development of alternative employment for populations that are most vulnerable to human trafficking. At present, millions of dollars and euros are being spent to help train countries of origin on how to close their borders (for example, to protect “Fortress Europe,” or control the spread of terrorism) but little is being done to address the root causes of human trafficking in countries of origin.

