

The Nexus between Climate Change and Human Trafficking

U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking (USCSAHT), a faith-based, national network that works to eradicate modern-day slavery, deplores the increase in human trafficking in the United States and around the world. Human vulnerability is a condition that is seized by human traffickers as an opportunity for exploitation. At any given time, millions of people in our global community become vulnerable due to a number of forces and factors. Climate change is one of these forces.

“Climate change increases the risk of natural disasters and places a strain on livelihoods; it exacerbates poverty and can potentially cause situations of conflict and instability. These conditions, when combined with a mismatch between demand for labor and supply and the proliferation of unscrupulous recruitment agencies, increase high-risk behaviors and other negative coping strategies among affected populations. This may include resorting to migrant smugglers, which in turn makes them vulnerable to trafficking in persons and associated forms of exploitation and abuse. The impact of climate change, however, is rarely considered as a potential contributor to human trafficking in global discussions or national-level policy frameworks and the nexus remains relatively unexplored.”¹

Climate change is becoming one of the drivers of the increasing numbers of human migration globally. The UN refugee agency reported that in 2013, there were three times as many people displaced by natural disasters as by conflicts. This same agency predicts that by 2050, up to 250 million people will be impacted by droughts, hurricanes, floods, and crop failures, associated with changes in climate and ecosystems.²

In his encyclical letter, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis underscores the tragic connection between environmental degradation and human migration. “There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever” (LS, 25).

When people are forced to move because of insecurity or instability in their homeland, they become vulnerable and desperate to access even the most basic necessities of life such as food, shelter, and livelihoods. Human traffickers abound where human vulnerability exists. Seeing opportunities to exploit persons who are made desperate by circumstances beyond their control, human traffickers seize human vulnerability as an opportunity to exploit vulnerable persons for labor, sex, and even their organs.

¹ International Organization of Migration, *The Climate Change—Human Trafficking Nexus*, (2016). P. 3

² <https://www.unhcr.org/493e9bd94.html>



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The global human trafficking network is also having an impact on global warming, climate change and environmental degradation. The availability and scale of global cheap labor has been shown to contribute to deforestation as well as to highly polluting methods of mining, brick-making, and shrimp farming.³ Ironically, persons who have been victimized themselves by environmental crises unwittingly exacerbate the problem through their exploited labor. Michael Gerrard, director of the Sabin Center for Climate Law at Columbia University, claims that the single most important thing that can be done to limit climate change and the human trafficking it engenders is to transition away from fossil fuels.⁴ Not only do fossil fuels contribute to climate change; their extraction facilitates human trafficking within local communities. The recent uptick in fracking for oil and natural gas in the northwestern United States, for example, has changed rural communities in radical ways by drawing human traffickers who hope to profit from the severe gender imbalance and high cash flow to the region.⁵ Rising incomes of fossil fuel workers, who are mostly male, has led to exponential growth in violence, drug use, domestic violence, and the trafficking of women.

The connection between climate change and human trafficking is thus a two-way street. As with all interrelated injustices, it is necessary to identify and transform the structures and systems that sustain injustice and grow the scale of their impact. Pope Francis calls us to use the lens of integral ecology in order to address the interrelatedness of human and environmental injustice today. He writes, (today) “we are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded and at the same time protecting nature” (LS, 139).

We urge policy makers at the national and international levels to immediately prioritize legislation, policies and practices that protect all of God’s creation. If we are to end the scourge of human trafficking, it is critically important that we address its root causes including the existential threat of climate change. We call on national governments to dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions, create high-paying jobs, ensure that clean air, clean water and healthy food are basic human rights, and end all forms of oppression.

³ Michale B Gerrard, University of Miami Law Review. Climate Change and Human Trafficking After the Paris Agreement. March, 9, 2018 . p. 359

⁴ Wudan Yan, “The Surprising Link Between Climate Change and Human Trafficking,” *The Revelator* (2018), <https://therevelator.org/climate-change-human-trafficking/>

⁵ Aryn Baker, “She Survived Sex Trafficking. Now She Wants to Show Other Women a Way Out,” *Time* (2019), <https://time.com/longform/windie-jo-lazenko-sex-trafficking-survivor/>