

## Sex Trafficking: A Global, Gender-based Threat to the Health, Development, and Rights of Adolescent Girls

### Background

An estimated 4.5 million people are currently being commercially sexually exploited across the globe, 98% of whom are female.<sup>1</sup> Between 20% and 40% of these are adolescent girls.<sup>1-2</sup> Forced or coerced sex trade entry of individuals under age 18 (i.e., sex trafficking) has been found to confer high risk for multiple other forms of gender-based violence and other serious health threats<sup>2-7</sup>, and is a serious impediment to empowering adolescent girls and women globally. Although much attention has been paid to this issue among policy makers during the past decade, the vast majority of the resulting efforts relate to criminal justice responses and, to a much lesser extent, survivor assistance. Little attention has been paid to identification of risk factors for sexual exploitation and mechanisms by which adolescents are trafficked, resulting in a shocking absence of evidence-based programs to prevent sex trafficking, or testing of such models. Thus, the global community continues to develop and implement approaches that respond to, rather than prevent, this widespread and severe form of gender-based victimization of adolescent girls.



Courtesy of NGO Committee on Migration

GEH faculty have conducted multiple studies across South and Southeast Asia, Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean to address the continuing scarcity of knowledge regarding prevalence, risk factors, mechanisms used across classes of perpetrators of sex trafficking. This work has resulted in numerous publications, including two research papers in *JAMA*.<sup>4-7</sup> More importantly, these studies have pointed to possible models for prevention, including a current NIH-funded effort to develop and test a community health clinic-based approach to identify and intervene with pregnant adolescent girls in Northern Mexico, a group whom we have determined to be at extremely high-risk of being trafficked.

### GEH's Current Work



Courtesy of Orelia Loza

1. Addressing gender-based violence and risk for commercial sexual exploitation among pregnant adolescent girls residing and seeking care in impoverished communities in Tijuana, Mexico (funded by NIH)
2. Prevalence, nature and adolescent vulnerabilities to trafficking for sexual exploitation among representative samples of women in the sex trade in two major Northern Mexico border cities (funded by NIH)
3. Prevalence and risk of labor trafficking of Central American women and girls on the southern Mexican border (funded by World Bank)
4. Determining the prevalence, risk and perpetrators of commercial sexual exploitation among a represent national sample of adolescent girls in Haiti (via support from the CDC)
5. Estimation of the prevalence and risk factors for sex trafficking among population-based samples of women in the sex trade across Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua (via support from the CDC)

### References

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