

Sexual Violence and Proximate Risks: A Study on Trafficked Women in Mexico City

ARUN KUMAR ACHARYA

Trafficking in humans is an integral part of the social and economic fabric in Mexico as in other parts of the world. This practice causes intolerable degradation and suffering for the girls and young women involved and are treated as a commodity. The process results in a risk to their physical and mental health, and in particular, to their sexual health, which I have explored in this research. Sixty trafficked women currently working as commercial sex workers were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire, and 13 in-depth interviews were conducted in the La Merced red-light area of Mexico City. Trafficked women in Mexico are basically young women, have little education and are mostly unmarried. The women I interviewed were working in cheap hotels and were living with a pimp. In the week prior to the interviews, 70 percent were beaten with objects, 100 percent were abused verbally, 28 percent were burned by lighting cigarettes, 36 percent were threatened with being killed and 22 percent were raped by clients and traffickers. Unwanted pregnancies and forced abortions were common; 65 percent had had at least one abortion. Almost all women had been infected by sexually transmitted diseases. The present research concluded that sexual violence has serious physical and mental health risks on trafficked women and it needs an urgent response from the government not only to provide health facilities to these women but also to eradicate women trafficking in Mexico.

Millions of girls and women suffer from violence and its consequences because of their sex and their unequal status in society (Lagarde 2001). Violence against women, also known as gender-based violence, is a serious violation of women's human rights. Worldwide, one out of five women

Arun Kumar Acharya, Research Professor, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, Universidad Autonoma de Nuevo León, Monterrey, Mexico. Email: acharya_77@yahoo.com
Mailing Address: Instituto de investigaciones Sociales, 5 Piso, Biblioteca Universitaria 'Rual Rangle Frias', Universidad Autonoma de Nuevo León, Av. Alfonso Reyes, 4000 NTE, CP. 64440, Monterrey, Mexico.

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is victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime (UN Millennium Project 2005), while one out of three women is beaten, coerced into sex or abused by a family member or an acquaintance (Heise et al. 1999). Gender-based violence, which includes physical and emotional violence, dowry death and female infanticide as well as forced prostitution, sex trafficking and slavery, is an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of equality, development and peace; it violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms by women.

In recent years, violence against women has received increased attention from international law. For example, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and its Optional Protocol, 1979/1999, calls on states to pursue a 'policy of eliminating violence against women'. We can also mention the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993); the chapter devoted to violence against women in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted by the UN World Conference on Women (1995); the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) which includes sexual violence such as rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution and forced pregnancy within the definition of crimes against humanity and war crimes; and the Beijing review (Beijing +5), which called for the criminalization of violence against women on the basis of racial grounds and included honor crimes for the first time. Nevertheless, until now no effective results can be observed. On the contrary, the number of victims of gender-based violence such as trafficking of women for the purpose of sexual exploitation, is continuing to grow.

In November 2000, the UN General Assembly adopted the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, and defined 'trafficking in persons' as

...the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs....

Trafficking of women is the third largest source of illegal income after weapon and drug trafficking (US Department 2006). However, the origins of the trafficking debate date back to the end of the 19th century when feminists such as Josephine Butler brought involuntary prostitution into international discourse under the term 'white slavery trade', a term that referred to the abduction and transportation of white women for prostitution. In a manner similar to today's campaigns, the issue received wide media coverage, a number of organizations were set up to combat it and national and international legislation was adopted to stop the 'trade' (Doezema 2002).

Today, nearly seven million people, mostly women (70-80 percent) and children become victims of trafficking each year (ICWAD Trafficking Facts 2004). They are forced to work in construction, farming, mining, domestic and childcare work, while victims of sex trafficking are coerced into prostitution, pornography, sex tourism, marriages and the mail order-bride trade.

According to Kempadoo and Doezema (1998) trafficking is a process through which women are brought into prostitution through the use of violence, coercion and abuse and are denied human rights and freedoms. As a consequence of this, women are subject to a range of abuses, as well as exposure to HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Thus, gender-based violence such as trafficking of women has serious health repercussions for victims that extend far beyond immediate physical injuries. Coerced sex—whether the result of domestic abuse, rape or trafficking—leads to unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS and reproductive health problems.

Considering the above discussion, the principal aim of this research is to see how sexual violence suffered by trafficked women in Mexico makes them vulnerable to greater health risks. This article has three specific objectives. Firstly, to analyze the socio-demographic profile of trafficked women; secondly, to investigate the major causes and mechanisms of women trafficking in Mexico; and finally, to examine the sexual violence suffered by the trafficked women in their profession and how this leads to different kinds of diseases.

The article is divided into two sections. First, the article describes existing literature on trafficking of women and prostitution, focusing mainly on violence and on health consequences. Next, the article analyzes results from fieldwork in Mexico City, focusing on the socio-demographic

characteristics of trafficked women as well as the causes and mechanisms of trafficking, sexual violence suffered and health risks faced by the trafficked women in Mexico City.

Trafficking and Gender-based Violence in Mexico

The number of victims of gender-based violence in Mexico grows every day. According to recent data published by the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Information (INEGI in Spanish), in 2006 nearly 40 percent of the women in Mexico had suffered physical, sexual and emotional violence during the previous 12 months (INEGI 2007). Every three minutes a woman is sexually violated in Mexico.¹ This alarming growth in violence against women which includes domestic violence, women trafficking, forced prostitution and killing of young women is currently an important public issue for the Mexican government, but the major concern remains about sex trafficking and forced prostitution because of its dual consequences, firstly, exploitation of women through sexual violence and secondly, the spread of infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS and STDs. To date, it is difficult to tell the exact number of women being trafficked into prostitution. Some evidence does exist to enable us to estimate how big the figure may be. For example, Teresa Ulloa, President of the Regional Coalition Against Trafficking of Women and Children in Latin America and Caribbean, commented that every day 400 women enter into prostitution² in Mexico City, out of whom 80 percent do so against their wills (González 2003). In another study, Acharya and Stevanato (2005) found that nearly 10,000 young girls and women are trafficked annually in Mexico to cities such as Mexico City, Cancun, Acapulco, Ciudad Juarez and Monterrey for the purpose of sexual exploitation. The same study underlines that in Chiapas, a state in the south of Mexico, for every ten trafficked women seven are trafficked inside the country and three are taken outside the country. The same research also indicates that the ongoing effect of the 1994 economic crisis and the current boom in sexual tourism in cities like Cancun and Acapulco are also correlated factors in the growth of sex trafficking in Mexico.

Women are particularly vulnerable in the nexus between trafficking and sexually transmitted infections like HIV/AIDS. The approach of national public health ministries and agencies to sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS increasingly recognizes that women's vulnerability

to HIV is integrally connected with discrimination and violence. Today this has become an important subject for politicians, academicians and for the general public due to its consequences on health and rapid changes in the number of HIV/AIDS patients. For example, in 2001 in Mexico there were 50,776 persons living with HIV/AIDS. The number of cases increased to 64,483 (2002), 71,584 (2003), 93,855 (2004) and by 2005 it had reached 102,575 cases. Twenty percent of all those identified cases were from Mexico City (Secretaría de Salud 2005). This data provides a glimpse of Mexico's epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases. One of the most important factors for this increasing number is unprotected heterosexual behavior and the growing sex market in several Mexican cities, including in Mexico City.

Studies on gender-based violence in Mexico and other parts of the world have recognized that violence against women such as their trafficking have a greater health risk primarily due to lack of access to services, isolation and exploitative working conditions (Acharya 2004; Binh 2006; GAATW 2001; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998). This kind of gender-based violence is accompanied by potentially life-long and/or life-threatening health consequences. It prevents victims from attaining the highest possible level of physical, mental and social well being. Hence, it is necessary to address the health implications of trafficking as a health hazard that further endangers victims' health in situations of sexual exploitation.

Research Methodology

Trafficked women are treated as a hidden population, thus an appropriate and flexible methodology was pursued during fieldwork. To locate the trafficked women in Mexico City, first I identified a client through a regular visit to the brothel area La Merced. Later, I developed a friendly relationship with him by inviting him to my house, cinema and for lunch and dinner. Once I gained his confidence, I informed him about my research project and asked him to find a brothel owner (or pimp)³ who could help me in my research.⁴ In the beginning, he declined to help me as this would be very dangerous but after one month of regular interaction he agreed and arranged an appointment with a brothel owner. After discussing my research with the brothel owner, I told her that I needed to identify some trafficked women for interviews. I explained the meaning of women trafficking and how it differs from other women who are in

prostitution. She agreed to cooperate but would charge 50 pesos (US\$5) per information. Whenever she found a trafficked woman (working with another pimp) she called me to arrange an interview.

Once I arrived at the brothel to collect information about a trafficked woman, I went directly to the indicated woman, produced my identity and asked her about an interview.⁵ Most of these women solicit their clients at the roadside in front of the hotel where they work; however, it was not possible to interview them there since they were under the constant vigilance of the pimp. So, when the woman did not have a client I paid the solicited amount at the hotel counter and took her to a hotel room as a 'client'. I adopted this method to keep my identity hidden from the pimp and traffickers, and once in the hotel room I conducted the interview.

At the beginning of the interview, I offered the women to come to my house, to another hotel or a restaurant, but they always responded with a 'no'. They said, 'This is our area; it is not possible for us to go out from this place, because *madrina* (madam) does not permit us to work in other places'. Often they questioned me: 'All kind of services are available in this hotel, so why do you want to go to other places?' Since these women were not allowed to leave the hotel, I acted as a client. In the hotel room, I interviewed them with the interview lasting around 30 minutes. After completing the interview, I asked the woman to help me find other trafficked women like her. With the help of these women, I constructed a chain and discovered other trafficked women inside the brothel working with other pimps. It is necessary to mention that after 15 interviews, I no longer had to ask my key informant for information about trafficked women as my network now provided me with all the contacts I needed. Using this snowball method, I obtained 60 interviews through a semi-structured questionnaire and 13 in-depth interviews during 2002 and 2006 among women who were trafficked from the countryside as well as from different urban centers of Mexico to Mexico City. All the interviews were conducted in Spanish.

General Characteristics of Trafficked Women

Poverty, lack of access to formal education and job opportunities and gender inequities are some of the principal causes why women fall into trafficking networks. In the case of Mexico what this research found

was that it is very difficult to underline a specific cause for the gender-based violence like trafficking, but the results obtained ascertained that trafficking of women is a result of 'multi-causal factors'. During the interviews, women cited a wide range of factors which drove them towards trafficking. The reasons mentioned were unemployment, poverty, gender-based violence, desertion by husband and ethnic conflict; in addition to these the *machismo culture* in Mexico and the high illiteracy rate among women and parents were also cited by some as reasons for trafficking in the country. Similar evidence can also be observed in the case of Yola, (see case study) where lack of employment opportunity including poverty and gender-based discrimination were the principal reasons for violence against women like in the case of trafficking of women in Mexico.

As can be observed from Yola's case, traffickers use various mechanisms to entrap a woman. Looking into the gravity of women's socio-economic situation and necessity, they promise employment with attractive remuneration including food, shelter and travel costs. In other words, to earn a woman's confidence and that of her family, the trafficker often presents himself as an employment agent. To convince the woman and succeed in his plan, the trafficker plays a variety of tricks over various sessions including a salary increase and a five-day working week. Once the woman and her family agree, the trafficker makes the travel arrangements. At the beginning of the journey, he puts the woman in numerous temporary locations and gives diverse training to teach her how to negotiate with clients, how to dress up and how to perform sexual relation(s). He also explains the rules and regulations of the brothel such as not leaving it without the permission of the owner and not talking or giving information to anyone about herself or others.

Information gathered during fieldwork indicates that false promises of employment as well as an exotic life in cities of Mexico and foreign countries (especially the United States) is a common tactic for traffickers. When the women come to know the reality of their kind of employment, in most cases they refuse to accept. When this happens, the pimp and traffickers use various kinds of violence to force the women to stay and work in the brothel. Many women said that after leaving home, their life became a 'life of violence'.

Out of the total sample of 60 trafficked women respondents, 12 were trafficked from different urban centers of Mexico and 48 were from rural

areas. Trafficked women in Mexico City were significantly younger; nearly 72 percent were aged less than 24 years (Table 1). One of the important characteristics of this illicit market is that only young women are considered. Basically, pimps do not prefer women who are older in age. According to one brothel owner: 'A woman over 25 years old is considered older and aged for this industry and also clients do not prefer this kind of woman'. She explained that clients often told her: 'the aged women do not have the same passion as a (woman of) 15 years'. We can see similarities between this and Yola's case. When she was in San Diego, the trafficker told her that: '*ya eres una vieja, los clientes no te quieren más*' (now you are old, clients do not want you any more). At that time she was 22 years old.

When it comes to the educational attainment of trafficked women, we can see from Table 1 that more than half had primary and above primary level education. In terms of their marital status, 63 percent were unmarried, 15 percent were married, 7 percent were divorced and 15 percent were single mothers. A majority of the trafficked women were therefore single. As one pimp said: 'I do not want to buy a married woman, even a

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

<i>Demographic Characteristics</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>
Age (years completed)		
Less than 20	41.7	25
20 to 24	30.0	18
More than 24	28.3	17
Educational status		
Illiterate	20.0	12
Literate up to primary	53.3	32
More than primary	26.7	16
Marital status		
Unmarried	63.3	38
Married	15.0	9
Divorced or deserted by husband	6.7	4
Unmarried mother	15.0	9
Ethnicity		
Mestizo (Spanish origin)	65.0	39
Indigenous	35.0	21

divorced one, because for me she is just like a used cloth, where she does not have the same smell as a new one’.

It is important to point out here that the brothel is treated as a market where women in sex work are treated as a commodity and in this place each aspect depends on loss and gain. For example, if a pimp buys a 20-year-old married or divorced woman who is less preferred by clients, the pimp is not getting the optimum earning from this woman. This woman can work in the brothel for a maximum of four to five years (as women older than 25 years are considered old in this business). Whereas if a pimp buys a young woman like a 15 year old or less, she can easily keep her in work for a minimum of seven to eight years. Moreover, trafficked women are preferred by clients and can generate a big profit for the pimp. Thus, a brothel owner is likely to gain more money when she buys an unmarried, young woman than an older married one.

The other demographic characteristics of trafficked women indicate that a majority belonged to the mestizo (Spanish mixed race) ethnic group (65 percent of those interviewed) and 35 percent were indigenous. The question is: why were more women mestizo? After a conversation with several pimps and traffickers, I found that mestizo women are preferred by clients because of their white skin. One pimp said: ‘Clients do not want to have sex with a dark skinned girl, they do not prefer indigenous women, though I can buy an indigenous woman for a cheaper price than a mestizo, but on her my (economic) gain is very marginal’. In general, the Spanish mixed people in Mexico have a fair skin, whereas indigenous people have darker skin. Madriz (1997) found that women’s (in general) race and ethnicity has a significant relation with the violence committed against them. She found that black women in the US experience more violence than white women and documented that there is an important intersection between racism and sexism in the lives of women and girls. This shows that gender-based violence is correlated with race or ethnicity.

Sexual Violence and Exploitation

Women working in prostitution always have a low status in society and a low value assigned to their sexuality (Kempadoo 1998). These women are also exposed to widespread physical and sexual violence. For example, the study conducted by Millers (1997) in the early 1990s in Columbus,

Ohio, reported that 94 percent of the women who were in prostitution had been sexually assaulted; 75 percent had been raped by clients, 61 percent beaten and 88 percent reported having been physically assaulted. Similar studies conducted in the United Kingdom, Canada, Norway and India indicated the prevalence of a high level of violence against women working in prostitution. These studies concluded that women not only suffer from physical and sexual assaults but also constantly face verbal threats such as murder and psychological abuse (Acharya 2006; Lowman 2000; Raymond 2004). While some researchers have concluded that violence is ubiquitous in all forms of prostitution (for example, Barry 1995), others believe the incidence of violence varies enormously in different prostitution venues. Also, it may vary from one brothel owner and trafficker to another.

As discussed earlier, trafficking is a process through which women are brought into the sex market and are forced by violence and coercion to submit to prostitution. This new domination of power and suppression over women denies them their human rights and autonomy and places them in a condition similar to slavery. This study suggests that we need to proceed cautiously when assessing claims about the frequency and nature of the violence perpetrated by pimps and traffickers. During the interviews and analysis, it was clearly found that the incidence of both physical and sexual violence at the hand of traffickers and pimps is usual in the life cycle of trafficked women. I analyzed the women who had been exposed to physical and sexual violence during the last one week and last one month at the time of the interview to see the intensity and kind of violence. The results show that in one week: 70 percent of the women had been beaten with an object, 100 percent had been abused verbally, 30 percent had been locked in the house without food, 15 percent had been intentionally burned by traffickers or the pimp (the madam), 28 percent had been drugged with cannabis, 38 percent had been threatened with being killed by the madam, 10 percent and 2 percent women reported that the madam put chilli powder in their eyes and vagina respectively. In addition, 22 percent had been raped by clients or traffickers, and 45 percent had been forced by the madam to have sex with more than one client at a time (Table 2).

If we look into the testimonies given by Yola and the data in Table 2, it is clear that the incidence of violence against women is distressingly frequent. The incidence of violence in the last one month before the

Table 2
Exposure to Physical and Sexual Violence

<i>Exposure to Violence</i>	<i>In the Last One Week</i>		<i>In the Last One Month</i>	
	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>
Beaten with objects	70.0	42	100.0	60
Abused verbally	100.0	60	100.0	60
Locked in a room	30.0	18	65.0	39
Intentionally burned	15.0	9	51.7	31
Drugged by cannabis	28.3	17	95.0	57
Threatened with being killed	38.3	23	100.0	60
Chilli powder put in the eyes	10.0	6	81.7	49
Chilli powder put in the vagina	1.6	1	81.7	49
Raped by clients and traffickers	21.7	13	93.3	56
Forced to have sex with more than one client at a time	45.0	27	98.3	59

interview indicates that violence is the norm and not the exception. As one woman told me:

For us violence is common, it is nothing new, we are habituated to it, here we do not have the right of our body, here we are treated just like an animal, it is *madrina* (madam) who decides all for us, when we have to work, with whom we have to work, what to do or not, when we have to eat, sleep etc., all these depend on her, we do not have right to say 'no', if we do not follow her words she just uses her power in many ways, for her our life is nothing, in this place her dog has more respect than us....

From this testimony it can be said that gendered power disparity makes men more likely to be aggressors/offenders and women more likely to be living in slavery-like conditions. Forced sexual submission is clearly a manner of controlling and humiliating victims; it is a way for making a victim experience that she does not have control over her own body and in one way this exposes her to serious health consequences.

Sexual Behavior of Trafficked Women

The earlier discussion stated that victims of trafficking are abused and exploited in many ways. The pimps or madams, including the traffickers use their supremacy over the women to control their bodies and sexuality

which has negative consequences on their sexual behavior. This happens because women do not have freedom; also they are scared of facing violence. So, as the women go through such a violent environment, it takes them to high-risk sexual behavior. The sexual behavior of trafficked women can be assessed through the number of clients they receive in a day and according to their typical sexual relations. The information obtained in Mexico City indicates that 10 percent of the women had one to four clients per day, 47 percent received five to eight clients and 43 percent had physical relations with more than eight clients per day (Table 3). This indicates that each woman received a different number of clients. To find out such differential characteristics of receiving clients by women, a bi-variate analysis was done among the age of women and their total residential time⁶ in the brothel with the number of clients received in a day. The results indicate an inverse relationship between the age of a woman and the number of clients. As a woman grows older, her number of clients per day decreases. It is due to client's preference; as Yola told during the interview:

Nowadays clients do not prefer me. When they (clients) ask for my rate, if I tell them, 200 pesos they say: '*ya eres una vieja, tu piel no tiene el mismo olor que una joven, ya bájale tu precio*' (You are an old lady, your skin does not have the same smell as that of a young one, so bring down your price).⁷

A customer confessed: 'If I want to eat a fruit, I should eat it before it ripens.' Also, a client chooses a woman who has not worked in the brothel for many years because he thinks that an older woman might have been infected by diseases.

In order to understand the sexual behavior of trafficked women, I also asked them if they used condoms during sex and if they did how frequently? I also asked them about the types of physical relations that they

Table 3
Number of Clients Received in a Day

<i>Number of Clients</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>
1–4	10.0	6
5–8	46.7	28
More than 8	43.3	26

practiced with their clients. On the basis of these questions, it was observed that 32 percent of the women had never used condoms, 47 percent had used it sometimes and 22 percent always used condoms during sex. This information shows how vulnerable this population is to infections transmitted via sexual intercourse (Table 4). The reason for neglecting the practice of safe sex is not that women do not want to use condoms, it is the pimp who forces them to have sex without condoms with the intention of earning more money. When women perform sexual relations without using condoms, the client pays more money. As the pimp orders the women not to use condoms it is impossible for them to negotiate with the client to have safe sex. As these women are dominated and suppressed by the pimps and traffickers, they do not have the right to take a decision about their bodies and moreover, this is a market where women are treated like a commodity as long as they are young.

On the other hand, the sex practiced by the women indicated that they were indulging in a wide range of sexual activities at a time as per the demand of the clients. Only one woman admitted during the interview that she only used to have vaginal sex with her clients, whereas, 25 percent practiced both vaginal and oral sex and 73 percent had vaginal, oral and anal sex (Table 4).

Health Risks among the Trafficked Women

Gender-based violence leads to greater human insecurity among the victims and this insecurity makes the women vulnerable to unintended pregnancies and abortions and infertility as well as different kinds of

Table 4
Typical Sexual Behavior of Women

<i>Sexual Behavior</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>
Use of condom		
Never	31.7	19
Sometimes	46.7	28
Always	21.6	13
Sex practices with clients		
Only vaginal	1.7	1
Vaginal and oral	25.0	15
Vaginal, anal and oral	73.3	44

STDs and HIV/AIDS (Kempadoo 1998; Truong 1990). Similarly, the United Nations Security Council (2000) states that women who live in gender-based violence like prostitution and trafficking are more vulnerable to STDs and HIV/AIDS. Thus, the control over women's body by the pimps and the exploitative environment make these women vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies, forced abortions and different kinds of sexual diseases. During the interviews, it was found that 24 women (40 percent) were exposed to an unwanted pregnancy, of which 23 women had an abortion (Table 5). Among these 23 women, 15 reported that they had had at least one abortion after entering the brothel, seven women said that they had had two abortions, and only one woman said that she had undergone more than two abortions. During my conversations with trafficked women, I found that very few abortions were performed in a medical clinic. This happened only when the madam came to know about the pregnancy at a very late stage. On the contrary, if the pimp knew about it in the early days, she gave some medicines which aborted the foetus.

Table 5
Exposure to Unwanted Pregnancies and Abortions

<i>Unwanted Pregnancies</i>		<i>Abortion</i>		<i>Number of Abortions</i>		
<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>1 time</i>	<i>2 time</i>	<i>More than 2 Times</i>
40.0	24 (60)	38.31	23 (24)	65.2 (15)	30.4 (7)	4.3 (1)

The harmful sexual behavior, violence and control over women's sexuality makes these women suffer more physically as well as socially. The most common health problems among the trafficked women were fever (60 percent), backache (56 percent) and sleep disorder (55 percent). Thirty-five percent of the women indicated that they had irregular menstruation, 32 percent had stomach and back pain during menstruation, 43 percent had heavy bleeding during menstruation, 42 percent had pain during intercourse, 47 percent had bleeding after intercourse, 25 percent had lower abdominal pain, 45 percent had abnormal vaginal discharge and 37 percent had burning sensation while urinating (Table 6).

As mentioned earlier, the use of condoms was minimal and the women worked in inhuman conditions. They also did not have access to good

Table 6
Number of Women Currently Having Health Problems

<i>Types of Health Problem</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>
Fever	60.0	36
Backache	56.7	34
Sleep disorder	55.0	33
Irregular menstruation	35.0	21
Stomach and back pain during menstruation	31.7	19
Heavy bleeding during menstruation	43.3	26
Pain during intercourse	41.7	25
Bleeding after intercourse	46.7	28
Lower abdominal pain	25.0	15
Abnormal vaginal discharge	45.0	27
Burning sensation while urinating	36.7	22
Itching or irritation	48.3	29

medical facilities. If they had a health problem, only the madam could take them to a medical clinic located near the brothel.⁸ There are also numerous drug stores located near the brothel selling imitation medicines as well as expired medicines at a cheaper price. If a woman reported her health problem to the madam, first she (madam) gave some kind of medicine and in an emergency she took the woman to a medical clinic. But, before going to the medical clinic the madam told the woman not to give any personal information or mention anything else to the doctor. After returning from the clinic, she would not tell the woman how much money she had spent, but would only say that she had spent a huge amount and asked the woman to repay it by taking more clients. The poor woman accepted whatever the madam said because she had no other options. Hence, the health effects of violence against women are serious, far reaching and intertwined as they live under domination and their slavery-like condition do not allow them to visit health clinics to get medical attention.

My questions and analysis on the reproductive health problems of each woman during the last six months had these results: nearly 57 percent of the trafficked women had a burning sensation, pain or difficulty during urination, whereas, 63 percent said that they had lower abdominal pain or pain in the vagina during intercourse and nearly 62 percent said that during vaginal discharge they had problems of itching or ulcers on both sides of the vagina; 48 percent of the trafficked women had problems

of discharging with lower abdominal pain and fever during discharge (Table 7). Hence, we can conclude that the women's reproductive and sexual health problems are an outcome of their high risk sexual behavior, which has a strong relation with the violence faced by them in their day-to-day life. Hence, this study obtained that the violence faced by the trafficked women is approximating them towards life threatening diseases, which is an important concern for the Mexico's health policy. The investigation also found that sexual abuse not only causes physical trauma but also leads to mental health problems and social suffering, which we can observe in the case of Yola.

Table 7
Number of Women with Reproductive Health Problems during the Last Six Months

<i>Reproductive Health Problem</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>
Burning sensation, pain or difficulty during urinating	56.7	34
Lower abdominal pain or pain in the vagina during intercourse	63.3	38
During vaginal discharge have problem of itching or ulcers on both side of the vagina	61.7	37
Problem of discharge with lower abdominal pain	48.3	29
Fever during discharge	48.3	29

Case Study

This case study helps understand the sexual violence against, and the health problems suffered by the trafficked women. It also offers an insight into how the women were lured—through different promises—into prostitution. I interviewed Yola⁹, in Mexico City. Yola was 23 years old and worked as a sex worker in La Merced, Mexico City. She was trafficked nine years prior to the interview to one of the brothels in San Diego, California from the state of Michoacán, Mexico. This is Yola's story:

When I was 14 years old, my mother had some serious health problems, for which we admitted her in a hospital. The doctor told us it was necessary to do a surgery, otherwise she would not survive. When my father asked about the total cost of the surgery, they said it was nearly 60 to 70 thousand pesos (US\$ 6-7,000). To get this amount of money,

we sold our land (agricultural) for 28,000 pesos (US\$2,800) and some part of the house, but that was not sufficient, so we borrowed some money from the village community. In this way, we gathered money and got the surgery done, but after one year we could not save my mother. She died because we didn't have enough money to buy her medicines. One year after my mother's death, the village community asked for their money, but we could not return it....

Luckily or unluckily, one day a person came to our village and he introduced himself in front of the village community as an employment agent and said that he provided employment to women in Mexico City and in the United States and said that he needed at least ten to 15 young women this time. The next day my father went to talk with *mayordomo* (village head) for a job for me. Both my father and *mayordomo* talked with the employment agent and after the discussion he assured my father that he will try to find good domestic work for me in the United States. After two days, he came to my house and paid 5,000 pesos (US\$500) and told my father that this was advance money and he would deduct it from my salary. One week later, along with other four girls from my village, we started our journey. That was the first time I was going out from my village, and though I was scared about the new environment, I was also happy that I could help my parents financially. After travelling for five hours in the evening we reached Mexico City where the agent took us to a hotel. We stayed for two days in Mexico City and started our passage towards United States. After three days of continuous travel, we arrived at Ciudad Juarez (border city between Mexico and the United States) and one week later in the evening we crossed the border. Once we crossed the border we walked for five to six hours until we reached a town (I do not remember the name), where our agent took us to a house and introduced us to a person and told us that now his friend would take us to San Diego and arrange jobs for us. After that he returned to Mexico.

We were scared because we did not have passports and other papers. But two days later we were taken to San Diego and once we reached there, he (the US agent) took us to a house where we saw a big fat woman speaking Spanish. She took us to a room where I found some

women having sex with boys. I was afraid and asked the agent about the place and he told me: 'I bought you all from my Mexican friend for sex work, and now you all have to work with this *hermana* (sister) like other girls.' After hearing this, I tried to run away from the place, but I could not. Then, they told me: '*ustedes están en Estados Unidos, están ilegal aquí, si van a escapar la policía les van a llevar a cárcel*' (you all are in the United States and all of you are illegal here, if you will try to escape from here, the police will take you to jail). This really scared us. Since my childhood, I had always been afraid of the police, as they torture very badly. After that they explained about the work, but along with my other friends I refused to work with them. They forced us and even then we didn't accept the work. Then they beat us and locked us in a house for a few days and said that they would not open the door until we accepted their work.

Two days later, a person came in the morning and asked us about our decision. When we said no to work and asked him to let us go, he started beating us and asked his other friends to come inside. Then they locked the door and abused us sexually, they also took some photographs and told us that if we did not accept the work, they would send those photographs to our parents. This terrified us and we thought about our parents and their social prestige. After that we told them that we would work. Once we accepted their demand, they taught us about the work, how we had to negotiate with clients and they also taught us some English. This training continued for a week and after that we started working.

Every day I had more than ten clients, charging each of them around US\$10 for 30 minutes. Sometimes the *hermana* asked me to work without condoms and for that she charged US\$15 to US\$20 per client. But at the end of the day the madam paid me only US\$10. Many times she also forced me to work at midnight and if I refused she scolded me. The day I entered this profession my life was changed to one of violence. I faced violence from *hermana* and sometimes also from the clients. When a client was not satisfied he scolded me in a vulgar language and beat me. Though I did not have any interest in the work, I continued working because I didn't have any option to go anywhere. I was living in a place which did not belong to me. I did not know

anyone there. After working continuously for a little more than five years, one day the agent from Mexico came and asked me to go with him. When I asked the reason, he said: '*ya eres una vieja, los clientes no te quieren más*' (Now you are old, the clients do not want you any more). After that he brought me to Mexico City and put me here (La Merced). He also told me that if I would like to return to my village I could, but I refused because I feel 'impure' for my work and also guilty. Also, I do not have the courage to face my parents. Since the last one year, I am working here (La Merced, Mexico City) as a sex worker.

For the last few months I am not getting more clients (two or three clients per day), so *dueña* (madam) is not happy with me. Everyday she (madam) scolds me and asks me to solicit more clients, also saying that 'if you want to eat and stay here then you have to take more clients'. Nowadays clients do not prefer me. When they (clients) ask for my rate, if I tell them, 200 pesos they say: '*ya eres una vieja, tu piel no tiene el mismo olor que una joven, ya bájale tu precio*' (You are an old lady, your skin does not have the same smell as that of a young one, so bring down your price).

Nowadays I am charging 100 pesos (US\$10) per client and sometimes even less than this. To get more money I also ask clients to have sex without condoms and for that they pay me 200 or 250 pesos (US\$20–US\$25).

Three weeks earlier (at the time of interview) I felt very sick; I was not able to work, so madam took me to a medical clinic to have a health check up. They did my blood as well as urine test. Two days later madam came with the medical report and said that I have HIV. Now I am very worried. Also she (madam) is forcing me to leave the place as soon as possible. Now I am nowhere, nobody likes me. Even my friends have stopped talking to me. I do not know what I will do now, where I will go and do not know what my destiny is.

Discussion

The case study shows that no one in Mexico City could be more vulnerable to gender-based violence than the women forced into trafficking. As has been suggested throughout this study, the health consequences are severe

and long lasting among trafficked women. The trauma of sexual coercion and assault at different stages of their life cycle leaves many of these women with a severe loss of self-esteem and autonomy. This, in turn, means that they do not always make the best sexual and reproductive health decisions for themselves. Many of them accept victimization as 'part of being women'.

The trafficked women in Mexico face serious health risks. Their ability to protect themselves from STDs and HIV/AIDS is drastically weakened by the threat of madam's violence, which exposes them to forced and unprotected sex. Their ability to negotiate condom use by their male partners is inversely related to the extent or degree of abuse in their relationship. Not only do they run serious risks of physical and sexual violence, but they are also stigmatized as the main carriers for spreading STDs and HIV/AIDS.

Nowadays in Mexico, about 102,575 persons are living with HIV (Secretaría de Salud 2003). Most of the studies conducted on prostitution in Mexico identify sex workers as 'a major reservoir of sexually transmitted diseases' and this has resulted in prostitution being seen as the cause of the disease rather than the consequence of economic marginalization. Inevitably, it also draws attention away from male sexual behavior and puts the onus of disease prevention on the women. While much of the literature focuses on the potential of sex workers to infect others with HIV and to treat them as 'disease carriers,' little has been written about the need to protect sex workers from abuse and disease.

This study suggests that trafficking of women is now an important national issue which requires an urgent and concrete response. Till date the government of Mexico has not done enough to combat and prevent the trafficking of persons, especially of women in the country. Though in February 2007 the Mexican senate passed the law of prevention and sanction on trafficking of persons under federal law against the delinquency and federal code of penal procedures, its results are yet to be analyzed. The gravity of the situation has sent shock waves in Mexican society due to the AIDS pandemic. A comprehensive approach is essential to address the economic, social and political aspects of trafficking in women. It is necessary to deal with the perpetrators, as well as, to assist the victims of trafficking.

NOTES

1. <http://www.univision.com/content/content.jhtml?cid=570436> (accessed on 23 May 2007).
2. This figure includes trafficked and non-trafficked women.
3. In this brothel area, there are more than 100 hotels and each hotel has one pimp.
4. My intention behind contacting a pimp was to discover the trafficked women in the brothel, as it was difficult to distinguish between voluntary and forced prostitution. Only pimps had an idea about who was forced into prostitution and who was not.
5. In this case my key informant was collecting the information on trafficked women who were working in the different hotels, when once I reached the brothel La Merced; she was indicating me the girl with the hotel name, and with that information I was approaching the woman for interview.
6. I have divided the residential period of trafficked women into three categories, i.e. less than one year, one to two years and more than two years.
7. At the time of the interview Yola was 23 years old. It is a typical characteristic of this illicit market that when women become 23–25 years old, they are considered old in this business. Also, each day more young women are visible in this brothel. One can find girls of eight to nine years working in prostitution.
8. Information obtained during fieldwork found most of these clinics to be fake.
9. Yola is not her real name.

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