



## Mexico

- Population: 123.8 million
- GDP per capita (in US dollars): 10,325
- Presidential regime with a federal organization
- Human development index (HDI): 0.756 (74<sup>th</sup> rank among 187 countries)
- Gender inequality index (GII): 0.373 (74<sup>th</sup> rank among 147 countries)
- Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI): Score of 35 on a scale from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean)
  
- It is estimated there are between 450,000 and 500,000 prostituted persons in Mexico (*Fondation Scelles*, 2013)
- Human trafficking generates approximately 22.6 billion US\$ (20.87 billion €) annually in Mexico
- Prohibitionist regime, but certain jurisdictions (13 of the 31 Mexican States) have regulationist policies. Some cities, mainly those that attract tourists, have created special zones where prostitution is tolerated.
- The Federal Penal Code condemns procuring with 2 to 9 years in prison in addition to fines (section 206), and with 8 to 15 years in prison when the victim is a minor or disabled (section 204).
- The law of 2012, reformed in 2014, defines and punishes human trafficking by sentences ranging from 5 to 30 years' imprisonment.
- 78 convictions for sex trafficking in 2014 (*U.S. Department of State*, 2015). The conviction rate for trafficking is only 2%.
- High rate of corruption. The government has not reported convicting a complicit official since 2010 (*U.S. Department of State*, 2015).
- Mexico is ranked second in the world for the prostitution of under-age individuals. 70% of girls found in situations of forced prostitution were younger than 18 years old. An estimated 16,000 children are trafficked each year. There are 25,000 child prostitutes according to the authorities, but according to witnesses this number should be doubled or indeed tripled (*Fondation Scelles*, 2013). Child sex tourists tend to come from the United States, Canada, and Western Europe.
- 70% of sex trafficking cases involve Mexican drug cartels.

- Recent explosion of violence due to organized crime. The number of kidnappings increased by 31% in 2013.
- Country of origin, transit and destination for human trafficking.
- Foreign victims of trafficking are from Central and South America (Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Brazil, Colombia, via the Dominican Republic and Cuba). The number of victims from Africa and China (often headed for Canada) and even India is also more growing.
- Domestic and external trafficking of women and girls mostly comes from poor areas.

Prostitution, drug cartels, and immigration are all heavily entwined in Mexico. In recent years, the government of Mexico has heightened their prosecution of sexual trafficking through legislation and social awareness. However, the high rate of corruption within the government, heavy involvement of violent cartels in the trafficking, and an intensely patriarchal society prevent any fundamental change. A large portion of the victims of prostitution and sexual enslavement are migrants deceived into accepting false job offers and a promise of a new life in the United States. This trend of economic migration is a necessity for both men and women alike in many poverty-stricken areas of Mexico and Central America; however, their experiences can vary greatly. During necessity-driven migration, women are often times exploited sexually. They are promised various jobs in the United States by “coyotes” vowing to take them across the border, and then the victims held in debt bondage to “pay off” the smugglers through forced prostitution.

Human trafficking generates approximately 22.6 billion US\$ (20.87 billion €) annually in Mexico (*UNICEF*, 2014). Sex tourism has also become an exceptionally popular trend in Mexico. Once procured, the girls are sent to popular tourist destinations throughout Mexico such as Acapulco, Puerto Vallarta, and Cancun and other northern border cities such as Tijuana (*U.S. Department of State*, 2014). Tijuana in particular has become known as the 'Bangkok' of the Americas. Most women trafficked to the United States either come from or go through Mexico. Accordingly, Mexico has become the second most prominent country of origin for victims trafficked to the United States after Thailand, according to the National Humans Rights Commission (CNDH) (*InSight Crime*, February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014). Be that as it may, a lack of further meaningful data creates difficulties in reporting the extent of what is truly occurring in the country at present.

### **Gender Inequality within a Strictly Patriarchal Society**

40 percent of the entire Mexican population lives in poverty, a leading contributor to the inability of women to change their circumstances, and consequently combat systematic oppression. When they are not being abused or coerced into the sex industry, women are often forced in by economic necessity.

In order to further understand sex trafficking in Mexico, it is imperative to comprehend the '*machismo*' culture which dominates the country and the widespread repression of women that accompanies it. Machismo within Mexican culture distinctly defines the gender roles of

women and men. It places a high value on 'manliness' and independent and dominant traits in a man; while it expects women to be submissive and dependent.

Women are not considered as equals within the society as a whole due to the ever-present machismo culture. The biggest victims of this culture are trafficked women. Research on prostitution in Mexico has found that “pimps and traffickers take advantage of the subordinate status of women and girls in both the United States and Mexico by exploiting sexist and racist stereotypes of women as property, commodities, servants and sexual objects”. (*Journal of Trauma Practice*, 2003). Procurers and traffickers use many forms of abuse and control, including starvation, beatings and much more. Minister of Social Development Rosario Robles stated that “in Mexico in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the worst expression of discrimination against women is violence. In this modern Mexico, there are still states where the punishment is greater for stealing a cow than stealing a woman” (*The Guardian*, February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014). The legal system currently does very little in its protection of women, particularly girls and women who are stolen from their own villages.

### **Child and Homosexual Sex Tourism**

Currently, Mexico is ranked second in the world for the prostitution of under-age persons. An estimated 16,000 children are trafficked in Mexico each year (*Journal of Trauma Practice*, 2003). Often times, these children are young girls between the ages of 12-14 who have been abducted from their own villages. They are kept in debt bondage by those who abduct, trick or coerce them into the trafficking. In many other cases, the children are runaways from abusive homes. A recent study of sex workers in Mexico discovered that nearly 70 percent of girls found in situations of forced prostitution were younger than 18 years old.

The organized prostitution and sale of under-aged girls is generally concentrated in tourist cities. Sex tourists tend to come from the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. A report by UNICEF and “Infancia Robada” (Stolen Children) stated that in the city of Juarez, Mexico (merely 10 miles south of El Paso, Texas), there were on average 800 children being used in the commercial sex industry (*El Paso Times*, June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2014). The average price for a child was about 5 US\$ (approx. 4,7 €). They are routinely forced to have sex with approximately 20-25 men daily. After these girls are used and abused by the traffickers for several years, they are thrown back out onto the streets.

The southwestern city of Puerto Vallarta is an active hub for gay sex tourism. More than 35% of the existing hotel capacity is dedicated to this sector of tourism. It is also the second most visited vacation destination in the world for homosexual US males. However, within this gay tourism culture exists the darker side of prostitution of men and under aged boys. It is very common to find prostituted boys in Puerto Vallarta.

### **Legal Protection**

Mexico currently has the proper legal framework in place for the protection of sex trafficking victims; however the enforcement of these laws is weak or altogether non-existent in many states. Mexico is presently considered a Tier 2 country by the human rights standards

outlined by the United States. A Tier 2 country is defined as a country “whose government does not fully comply with the Trafficking Victims Protection Act TVPA's minimum standards but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards.” In 2012, the federal government passed the *General Law to Prevent, Sanction, and Eradicate Human Trafficking and for the Protection and Assistance of Victims*. The law was intended to clearly outline the role of each branch of the government in the prosecution of procurers and clients alike. It was then reformed in 2014 to specify certain portions. The reform added increased severity of punishments for traffickers, including up to 30 years of imprisonment, and widened the scope of crimes considered to be human trafficking. For example, the sale of anyone under the age of 18 for sexual purposes is now automatically classified as trafficking (*Time*, July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2013). In September 2013, the government issued the law's “implementing regulations”. Nonetheless, in the years following its implementation, only the police forces of large cities have attempted to enforce the law.

In the year following the law's passage, federal and state authorities reported convicting at least 52 trafficking offenders. In 2014, the federal government reported “increased trafficking convictions and sentences in comparison to the previous year”. There have also been increases in raids on hotels, bars and massage parlors in major urban areas such as Mexico City. Unfortunately, the rate of convictions of the few charged was only 2 out of every 100 traffickers arrested. The fact that a 2% conviction rate is reported as an 'increase' by the Mexican government reflects the dire situation at hand. Low rates of convictions demonstrate how ill-equipped the Mexican legal system is for implementing and executing the law. Most of the traffickers who are arrested go free due to “procedural errors during the legal process.

There are still many who critique the law's ability to make any meaningful impact. The law and its contents are well-intentioned, but there are virtually no means of enforcement. In other words, the program is greatly inhibited by a lack of sufficient funding and general willingness to enforce it. Many civil society groups worry that “the law lacks precise language and is too complex to be consistently applied by the necessary authorities.” Additionally, “NGO's, members of the government, and other observers continued to report that trafficking-related corruption among public officials, especially local law enforcement, judicial and immigration officials presents a significant concern”. Corruption within the Mexican government and police forces has been a persistent issue that has perpetuated and exacerbated major problems such as sex trafficking and forced prostitution. In 2013, two law enforcement officers in Tijuana were charged with extorting a sex worker. The extortion of prostituted persons and trafficked women can range from seeking bribes in the form of sexual services to coercing women away from reporting crimes committed against them.

### **Need for Rehabilitation Programs**

Approximately 70% of women freed from trafficking eventually return to prostitution due to a lack of job opportunities and harsh social stigma. There is a severe deficiency of adequate rehabilitation programs and resources currently available to survivors of trafficking. It is necessary to provide culturally appropriate rehabilitation programs as well - ones in which girls can use their native language in an environment that fits their cultural standards.

Currently, various programs exist through NGOs and small government organizations that work to help identify victims and place them into transitional programs. The transitional programs attempt to aid girls psychologically and prepare them for reentry into normal society. Unfortunately, these programs are sparse and inconsistent. Often times, shelters for migrants or domestic abuse victims are reluctant to take in sex trafficking victims out of fear of retribution from violent cartels.

### **Involvement of Violent Drug Cartels**

In 2013, a study by CATW-LAC found that 70% of sex trafficking cases involved Mexican drug cartels. In 2013 alone, organized criminal gangs made 10 billion US\$ (9,24 billion €) from the enforced sexual enslavement of thousands of women and young girls. After the drug and arms trade, human trafficking is the third most lucrative enterprise for organized crime. Cartel violence is rampant and often times uncontrollable. Increasingly, the trafficking networks are now forced to make pacts and payments to the cartels depending on the territory in which trafficking takes place. It is common for the cartels of Mexico -who essentially have more power than the Mexican military- to kidnap, manipulate and entrap girls at a very young age and sell them into the sex trafficking. They are subsequently beaten and forced to have sex with dozens of men per day. It is also typical for the cartels to kidnap young girls and keep them as personal sexual slaves. One of the most prominent cartels, “los Zetas”, has reportedly been the most heavily involved in the human trafficking industry in recent years. In 2013, the Mexican government reported that the number of kidnappings increased by 31%, a distressing indication of the heightened violence within the country.

### **Health**

Traffickers use a number of methods to force women and girls into submission, most of which can be severely detrimental to the health of the women. Tactics range from physical violence to forced drugging. An extremely frequent tactic involves injecting victims with highly addictive drugs such as heroin or methamphetamine. Often times, the girls are drugged daily until they are so addicted that they will obey and be completely submissive. By addicting the girls and women to drugs early on, procurers and traffickers easily control them. Another common means of coercion includes throwing chili powder into the woman's eyes and vagina at any sign of defiance.

The victims are usually in situations that make it difficult to negotiate condom use when they face the risk of violence from a client or procurer. As a consequence of exposure to hard drugs and unprotected sex, trafficked women are also at high risk of HIV/AIDS infection and other STIs, including Hepatitis B.

The violence against trafficked women has increased correspondingly with the heightened violence of the Drug Wars amongst cartels. The Mexican government has been taking small steps towards improving their legal structure, but is severely lacking in legitimate enforcement. Human trafficking in Mexico today is complicated as traffickers and cartel members alike continue to operate with almost complete impunity. The current state of prostitution and trafficking in Mexico is stagnant -- if not worsening with time. In order for

improvements to occur, the government must also begin systematically combating violent organized crime.

## Sources

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