**‘Overall Undeserving’: Exploring Views About Which Migrants Deserve Anti-Trafficking Assistance in Tuscany, Italy**

Human trafficking is defined as the recruitment and coercion of individuals into labour or other activities that entail their exploitation. While victims of human trafficking can be led to engage in any type of labour or criminal activity, most anti-trafficking efforts primarily focus on people who are exploited in sex work. Dr Veronica Marconi of Oregon State University recently carried out a study aimed at better understanding how anti-trafficking organisations in the Italian region of Tuscany determine which migrants are deserving of their assistance.

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The huge wave of migration from developing countries to Europe has become a heated topic of discussion over the past decades. While non-profit organisations work to protect and integrate these migrants into society, many individuals who reach Europe are exploited, underpaid, and taken advantage of.

One of the risks for incoming migrants is becoming a victim of human trafficking, which involves the recruitment of individuals through force or deception, with the goal of exploiting their labour for profit. Migrants escaping war or poverty are particularly vulnerable to exploitation through human trafficking, as they are often desperate to improve their lives, making them more likely to believe a trafficker’s lies or false promises.

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Human trafficking includes various activities, such as the handling and selling of human organs, forced begging, and the exploitation of sexual, agricultural, construction and manufacturing labour, among others.

Dr Marconi of Oregon State University carried out a 9-month field study to better understand anti-trafficking efforts in Tuscany, Italy. The research presented in this podcast analyses the narratives put forward by anti-trafficking organisations in Tuscany when assessing the extent to which different migrants deserve anti-trafficking assistance.

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Dr Marconi conducted her field work in 2018. At the time, Italy was the point of entry for over 100,000 migrants per year, many of whom became particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

While the Italian government and non-profit organisations introduced several initiatives aimed at protecting vulnerable migrants, most anti-trafficking measures specifically targeted migrants engaging in sex work, neglecting exploitative conditions occurring in agriculture, manufacturing, construction and other labour sector.

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The key aim of Dr Marconi’s study was to investigate the factors underpinning the prioritisation of potentially coerced sex work over other forms of exploitative labour in the provision of anti-trafficking assistance to migrants in Italy. To do this, she interviewed anti-trafficking stakeholders at non-profit organisations that were part of the Tuscan Anti-Trafficking System of Social Interventions.

The Tuscan Anti-Trafficking System of Social Interventions is a network of 41 private and public organisations, including faith-based and secular charities, cooperatives, welfare associations, women and youth centres, and governmental bodies, all working to protect and empower victims of human trafficking in Tuscany. When analysing responses gathered in her interviews, Dr Marconi used the notion of ‘deservingness’ introduced by medical anthropologist Sarah Willen.

Sarah Willen describes deservingness as the ‘flip side of human rights’, as rights are supposedly universal, while deservingness is context-dependent and conditional to some presumed or real characteristics. In her studies, Willen used this idea to investigate the ways in which health service providers sometimes uphold universal rights only for some individuals, neglecting the rights of others.

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By interviewing anti-trafficking stakeholders, Dr Marconi wished to understand what perspectives, assumptions, and processes make some migrants seemingly ‘underserving’ of anti-trafficking assistance.

The UN defines human trafficking as the act of recruiting, transporting, or transferring people, through the means of coercion, abduction or deception, for the purpose of exploitation. Interestingly, Dr Marconi observed that this simplified definition is sometimes used by anti-trafficking lawyers to justify their inability to assist some migrants.

Specifically, if employers who exploit migrants were not personally involved in their coercive recruitment and transportation, the workers may no longer be viewed as victims of human trafficking.

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Anti-trafficking stakeholders interviewed by Dr Marconi also pointed out that migrants must acknowledge that they are victims of human trafficking in order to access anti-trafficking services. This can be very difficult, as many exploited workers rely on their meagre source of income or are otherwise dependent on their employers, which can dissuade them from reporting their exploitation.

For exploited migrants who are not lawfully residing in Italy, reporting an employer might also result in deportation and losing the opportunity to change their life. Moreover, migrants might not realise that they can be recognised as victims of human trafficking, as their past experiences in their country of origin may have also been exploitative.

While this is also often the case for sex workers, anti-trafficking organisations do their best to reach out to these workers. For instance, some organisations patrol known prostitution hotspots and directly engage with sex workers, offering health advice and contacts that they can reach if they wish to exit prostitution. In contrast, exploited workers in agriculture, construction and industrial settings are rarely educated about their rights and alternative opportunities, and instead are often perceived as partly responsible for their own exploitation, due to their unwillingness to report it.

When Dr Marconi asked interviewees why educational units, such as those engaging sex workers, were not also engaging victims of other exploitative labour, she found that these units were either expected to be introduced sometime in the future or were considered far harder to implement.

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Some of the anti-trafficking stakeholders also suggested that there are far fewer victims of labour trafficking than of sexual exploitation. This widespread notion is based on unreliably compiled statistics, as many past studies on existing data on labour and sex trafficking show.

Other interviewees believed that non-sexual labour exploitation primarily occurred in allegedly mafia-ridden regions of Southern Italy. If it did occur in Tuscany, most believed that it was mainly or only carried out by members of the Chinese community, and that victims were too difficult to access given language barriers and isolation from Italian society. These forms of ‘othering’ were often used by anti-trafficking agents as justifications to explain why they were unable to assist victims of labour trafficking, if they existed at all.

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Finally, Dr Marconi found that sex labour elicits stronger moral and emotional responses even among trained professionals than other types of exploitative labour. Specifically, there appears to be an underlying assumption that no woman could ever willingly consent to sell her body, and thus most or all sex labourers must have been coerced into sex work.

Dr Marconi found that when organisations were faith-based and rooted in Catholic principles, they aimed to convince women to cease what they viewed as ‘immoral’ activities, while secular organisations held a less judgemental approach generally more respectful of individual choices. Whether faith-based or secular in orientation however, most stakeholders still appeared to view sex work as illegitimate work, and more likely to involve exploitation.

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Overall, Dr Marconi’s research sheds light on common discursive narratives that anti-trafficking stakeholders in Italy use to determine how deserving, or ‘underserving’, migrants are of receiving anti-trafficking assistance. Her observations could support a qualitative understanding of the challenges of the current system, and inform the development of effective interventions to address issues of migrant labour, to expand more inclusively to all forms of exploitation.

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This SciPod is a summary of the paper ‘Overall Underserving: Narratives of Migrants’ Deservingness of Anti-Trafficking Assistance in Tuscany, Italy’, 2022. <https://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/downloads/wh2470546>

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