

Describing the Unobserved: Methodological Challenges in Empirical Studies on Human Trafficking

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INTRODUCTION

As the international awareness to the problem of trafficking in persons has increased, the number of studies and publications on the topic has escalated. A substantial number of these publications set out to describe the various elements associated with human trafficking, including estimates of the scope of the phenomenon, descriptions of trends, and characteristics of victims (Kelly, 2002). However, the methodologies applied are not always well suited for these purposes, and inferences are often made based on very limited data. This has led to an urgent call for the improvement of research methods to study human trafficking (see for instance Kelly, 2002; Laczko and Gramegna, 2003; EU, 2004).

The concern is not only one of academic pedantry; inadequate data collection methods might result in descriptions that have little to do with reality. Consequently, there is a danger that policies and interventions developed based on these findings will be ineffective (Kelly, 2002). In regard to the use of numbers in the human rights field, Mike Dottridge (2003: 82) argues:

Some human rights activists argue that exaggeration is not a major problem, as long as attention ends up being given to whatever abuses are occurring. This seems to be a rather idealistic, not to say naïve approach, which ignores the damage that can be done by misrepresenting the scale of a problem. [...] an inaccurate estimate of the problem is likely to result in a remedy being proposed that is equally inappropriate.

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The action needed to deal with human trafficking from Hungary, for example, is different if the annual number of estimated victims is 200, as opposed to 1,000 victims. Overestimating the extent of a phenomenon can have equally negative consequences as underestimating it. Uncritically using or publishing findings not based on sound methodologies may result in misinformation and hinder the creation of relevant policies and appropriate programmes.

Research in the field of human trafficking is difficult for many reasons. Perhaps the most challenging factor is that most of the populations relevant to the study of human trafficking, such as prostitutes, traffickers, victims/survivors, or illegal immigrants constitute so-called *hidden populations*. A hidden population is a group of individuals for whom the size and boundaries are unknown, and for whom no sampling frame exists. Furthermore, membership in hidden populations often involves stigmatized or illegal behaviour, leading individuals to refuse to cooperate, or give unreliable answers to protect their privacy (Heckathorn, 1997). For empirical studies, this brings other challenges, and requires approaches different from those commonly used for more easily observable populations.

Many policy areas related to human trafficking, such as prostitution, labour market protection, and immigration laws, are highly politicized, and this further complicates the situation. Key actors with access to relevant information can have political agendas that may influence how they choose to use the information they have at their disposal (Vandekerckhove, 2003). A substantial number of publications on trafficking for sexual exploitation are influenced by political debates surrounding these topics. While the importance of a continuous social debate on ideological and moral issues should not be downplayed, there is now a need for more systematic empirical knowledge on the mechanisms of human trafficking, who it influences, and how it can be countered.

In this paper we will discuss the production of *various types of data* on human trafficking, analyse existing data and research, and suggest methods for improving enhanced data collection techniques and developing new methodologies. We will focus both on the development of estimates of victims of trafficking, as well as the production of data that describes the characteristics of this group. The discussion will be based on a review of publications on trafficking for sexual exploitation in Europe (Tyldum et al., forthcoming), as well as our own experiences from the study “Crossing Borders”, on transnational prostitution and trafficking in Oslo (Brunovskis and Tyldum, 2004). During our research we found some answers, but also met with several questions and challenges relating to obtaining the best possible quality of data. We hope that our experience in this field may be of use to others working on the same topic, a research field

that indeed holds great challenges, but through its urgency and importance also great rewards.

A STUDY OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND TRANSNATIONAL PROSTITUTION IN OSLO

The study “Crossing Borders” was financed by the Norwegian Plan of Action for Combating Trafficking in Women and Children. The aim of the study was two-fold: (1) to gain a better understanding of the prostitution arenas in Oslo in order to estimate the number of women selling sexual services and identify their basic characteristics, including ethnic and national origin; and (2) to explore and develop a better understanding of the mechanisms that make trafficking for sexual exploitation possible.

In order to acquire the broadest possible picture of the phenomenon, several different data collection methods were used, including qualitative and quantitative methodologies, rapid assessment methods (i.e. Capture-Recapture estimations of women in street prostitution), and a telephone survey of women in prostitution who operate through individual advertisements. The latter methodology was somewhat unorthodox, but highly successful. During a four-month period we systematically collected telephone numbers from different advertisements (print and electronic) for escort and massage services. These numbers were called during October 2004 to establish if they were still in use. Much to our surprise, we discovered that it was possible to obtain substantial information from these telephone conversations in order to develop a survey of the basic characteristics of women in prostitution who operate through advertisements. The survey had a response rate of more than 50 per cent, a response rate higher than many surveys in the overall population in Norway.¹ For women who refused to participate, language proficiency (Russian, English, or Norwegian) as well as type of accent were recorded, and used to adjust for non-response for the various national groups. An estimate of the total number of women working in this arena and their characteristics were developed based on the response rates in the various rounds of the survey, information given in the interviews on the number of telephones used per woman, and the number of women per telephone number.

While the telephone survey elicited interesting information, it did not allow us to determine the number of trafficking victims or provide taxonomy of the forms of exploitation they experienced. For reasons of data quality, as well as security for the respondents and interviewers, sensitive information on organizers and pimps was only recorded if the women volunteered this information. The aim of

this part of the study was *not* to estimate the number of women trafficked, but to get a better understanding of this arena where human trafficking is known to take place, and to get information on basic background characteristics of a population of which victims of trafficking constitute a subpopulation.

In order to obtain a better understanding of the elements of force and exploitation in the Norwegian prostitution arena we conducted in-depth interviews with a wide variety of respondents, including women in prostitution, emancipated victims of trafficking, and various key respondents in Norway and abroad (for a more thorough presentation of methods and findings, see Brunovskis and Tyldum, 2004).

DETERMINING WHO TO COUNT

The question of numbers of victims of trafficking is in many ways fundamental. This is not because of quantitative idolatry, but because counting something presupposes two basic operations of key concern for researchers and policy makers alike: (1) conceptual identification, and (2) practical identification, i.e. being able to say “this is a victim of trafficking”. From that information much else flows: targeting, identifying characteristics, rights and protection under international law, etc. (Pedersen and Sommerfelt, 2001).

In order to count the number of victims, or generally develop our understanding of trafficking in persons, we need to, first of all, define what constitutes trafficking, and what does not. An important step toward developing more coherent research on trafficking arrived with the establishment of a definition of trafficking in the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons (UN, 2000).² However, there are still some ambiguities inherent in this definition, and perhaps even more so, in the way it is commonly operationalized. Identification of trafficking victims demands clarification of the interpretation of the UN Protocol, in particular on aspects such as exploitation of the prostitution of others, and exploitation of a position of vulnerability.

Still, independent of the definition used, it is difficult to distinguish traits of victims of trafficking that are externally observable, that is, elements by which we can determine if a person is a victim of trafficking simply through observation. In order to determine if a person has been manipulated or lured, and the extent to which she has been exploited, the person has to give up this information herself. We will, therefore, argue that unambiguous classifications are most easily obtained through survey data.

Determining the stages of trafficking

A basic distinction should be drawn between the stages that a victim of trafficking can occupy in relation to the trafficking process. According to current knowledge, it is reasonable to distinguish between three main stages:

- Persons at risk of being trafficked,
- Current victims of trafficking, and
- Former victims of trafficking.

For each stage we generally want to know the number of people, their characteristics, and their probability of entering the next stage. Those are mainly quantitative concerns, but we are also interested in the much more qualitative question of *process*; how do they enter into one stage from another? And, when in a particular stage, how can their situation and freedom of action be described (Pedersen and Sommerfelt, 2001)?

In order to describe and understand these stages, we need to be comparative. Both in comparing the various stages in themselves, and in comparing with those that are outside. That is, in order to understand who is at risk of being trafficked, we need to compare the population of victims of trafficking with those who have not been subjected to this form of exploitation. Furthermore, we need to understand how variation in one stage influences the probability for entering the next, as well as the challenges and actions that victims face in the next stage of trafficking. Victims of trafficking may be exposed to conditions with large variation in forms of exploitation, coercion, and manipulation. These conditions are likely to influence his/her probability of getting out of the coerced situation, as well as his/her future actions and problems in the course of rehabilitation. While the first comparison (i.e. comparison of groups in different stages) is best facilitated with quantitative data, the second type of comparison is best facilitated through qualitative assessments, for instance, what anthropologists often refer to as life stories.

Time periods and estimates

If we wish to estimate the number of men and women who are current trafficking victims, it is necessary to specify for what time period the estimation is valid. The number of persons living under conditions that can be classified as trafficking at any given time may be significantly different from the number of persons trafficked for i.e. labour exploitation, organ removals, or prostitution every year. We need to know how long people in various groups stay in a particular stage, and how and when people move between stages, in order to

understand and correctly interpret any number estimating the total amount of victims of trafficking.

For instance, in the prostitution arena in Oslo, we were able to establish that some 600 women worked in prostitution during the month of October 2003. Of these, one-third were of Norwegian origin, one-third were migrants with permanent residence or citizenship in Norway, and one-third were in Norway on short-term stays. Based on information on length of stay, and number of months worked in prostitution each year, we were able to estimate that a total of 1,100 different women work in prostitution in Oslo every year, and that among these, about 80 per cent are of non-Norwegian origin (Brunovskis and Tyldum, 2004).

ESTIMATION METHODS AND TARGET POPULATIONS

When making inferences from studies of small groups of individuals, it is necessary to consider whether these data are generalizable to larger populations. To our knowledge, there are no studies to date that can claim to be representative of all victims of trafficking within a region. Most current studies of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation are based on studies of former victims described by, or discovered through, organizations or law enforcement bodies in connection with law enforcement intervention, involvement with a support agency, or within some form of return programme to their country of origin (Kelly, 2002). Another group of studies focus on arenas where systematic exploitation of migrants is known to take place (i.e. prostitution) (see for instance IOM, 1996a, 1996b; Kelly and Regan, 2000), while the final group of studies are based on data on migrants (IOM, 2001). As illustrated in Figure 1, these are populations where victims of trafficking make up a subpopulation (i.e. persons migrating or crossing borders), or populations that in themselves are subpopulations of victims of trafficking (i.e. victims of trafficking registered by law enforcement agencies). The ratio of assisted victims to the number of victims at large is unknown, as is the biases associated with the subpopulation. Furthermore, both the ratios and the biases are likely to vary strongly between regions and over time, making it very difficult to make inferences to the overall population.

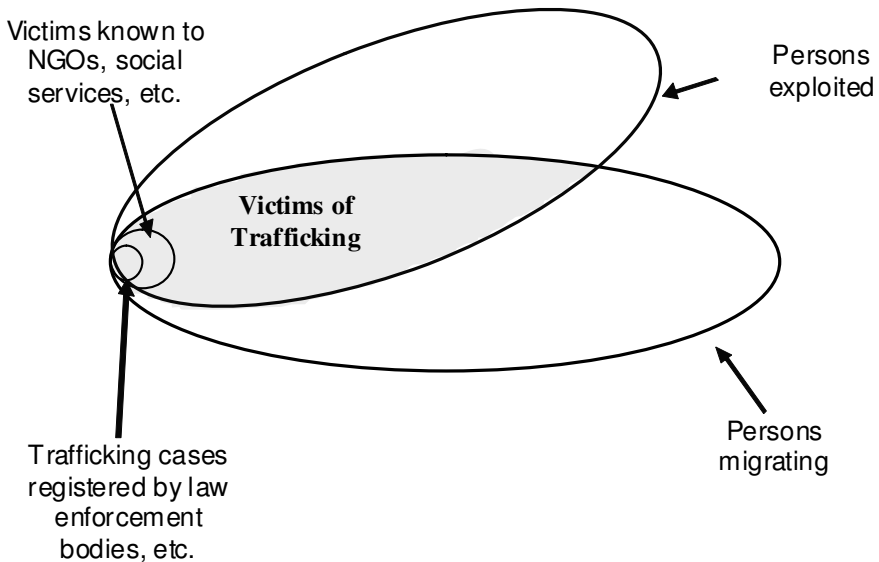
Data of subpopulations of victims of trafficking

Data on trafficking cases registered by law enforcement or organizations administering rehabilitation programmes in the countries of origin are commonly presented in analyses on human trafficking. While some studies mainly use these data to present minimum estimates of numbers of victims, and do not

attempt to infer the overall population of victims of trafficking (see for instance Kelly and Regan, 2000; IOM, 1996b; Regional Clearing Point, 2003), these data are too often referred to as describing victims of trafficking as such, as well as differences between countries or regions (IOM, 2001; IOM Armenia, 2001; IOM Kosovo, 2002). While data on these subpopulations holds the advantage that they refer to a concrete population and are based on positive identification of victims, several problems associated with these data require great attention if they should be used for purposes such as developing victim profiles, cross national comparisons, or even for analysing trends.

FIGURE 1

TARGETING VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING: SUBPOPULATIONS
AND POPULATIONS WHERE VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING CONSTITUTE
SUBPOPULATIONS (relative sizes of populations
are hypothetical and likely to vary between regions)



The number of cases registered by law enforcement might be an indicator of the functionality of the law enforcement apparatus in a given country, but is unlikely to be a good estimate of the number of trafficking victims. Recent developments in official trafficking statistics in Norway may serve to illustrate this; human trafficking was until recently believed to be a minor problem in Norway, and up until 2004 only a handful cases with suspicion of trafficking had been registered by law enforcement bodies. With the introduction of the

Plan of Action for Combating Trafficking in Women and Children in 2003, law enforcement bodies were instructed to give higher priority to trafficking for sexual exploitation, and increased resources were given to this field. As a result, there was an exponential increase in the number of cases identified; while only a few cases were identified in 2003, the police became involved in 42 cases³ where trafficking for sexual exploitation was expected in the first ten months of 2004 (statements made by the Minister of Justice and the Police, *Stortingets Spørretime*, 2004). There is little that indicates that these numbers reflect an exponential increase in trafficking in persons as such, from 2003 to 2004, but is generally believed to be related to the shift in attention and the increased resources. Clearly, these numbers cannot be used to illustrate any trend in the development of trafficking in Norway over the last years. Similarly, comparisons with other countries will be misleading, unless it can be assumed that a similar approach, amount of resources, as well as legal framework is used for the given year of comparison.

In spite of the strong increase in identified cases of trafficking it remains difficult to determine if the identified cases represent a tip of an iceberg, or if all or close to all incidents of trafficking for sexual exploitation are usually identified. This leads us to the second problem in analysing data from law enforcement or rehabilitation organizations involved – the problem of representativity and bias.

Since the ratio of cases identified by law enforcement or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to the total number of trafficking cases in an area is seldom known, it is difficult to determine to what extent the identified cases are representative of the universe of trafficking cases, and which biases they introduce to our data. Focusing a study on these groups will not only be problematic in terms of developing estimates and analysing trends, but perhaps even more so in terms of producing data for description of basic characteristics of victims of trafficking.

Cases that are registered by law enforcement are different from all other cases of trafficking because they actually were discovered, and taken seriously, by the police. The cases identified are likely to be influenced by two factors. First, the ability of police and law enforcement agents to recognize trafficking when confronted with it. For instance, in the prostitution arena, some national groups may be identified as being at higher risk of being victims of trafficking, leading law enforcement agencies to increase their attention to segments of the prostitution arena where these national groups are observed. This may again lead to a higher detection rate of these groups. Similarly, since under-aged prostitutes may be possible to identify based on external characteristics, we can expect them to have different detection rates from adult victims, either because they

are more often identified by community workers, clients, and others (giving them higher detection rates), or because traffickers are more careful when selling child victims, which consequently makes children more difficult to detect. To date we have too few systematic analyses of these biases, and consequently, any reporting on characteristics such as age distribution or nationality of victims identified by law enforcement is not likely to be representative for the victims at large.

Second, the probability of being identified by the police will depend on how the victims themselves behave in contact with representatives of law enforcement. It is interesting to note that even among trafficking victims who are subjected to severe physical and mental abuse, very few seem to ask for help when they have the possibility, and many go to great lengths to avoid contact with the police (Brunovskis and Tyldum, 2004). Consequently, we may assume that the victims identified by the police may be different in regard to personal resources, in particular in regard to important aspects such as trust and access to information. Since we do not have systematic knowledge about the cases that are *not* disclosed by the police, we cannot know if victims registered by law enforcement were just lucky, or if they were discovered and assisted because they were different.

The same problem of institutional bias can be argued to be valid for the sub-population of victims who come in contact with the rehabilitation apparatus. It is generally believed that this group constitutes a small proportion of those who fall victim to trafficking. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Ukraine, the majority of the women who come in contact with their rehabilitation apparatus contact them on their own initiative, often many months or even years after they have returned to their home country (Personal communication, October 2003). We may assume that having access to resources like education and social networks makes it easier to contact rehabilitation services and ask for help. We can thus expect that the victims who contact NGOs for assistance and rehabilitation are systematically different from those who do not. And perhaps most importantly – seeking help is a realistic option only for those who have and are aware of an active organization in their community. Thus, areas with many NGOs (or where information about rehabilitation services is well known) are more likely to register victims of trafficking.

We do not wish to argue that studies of victims identified by law enforcement bodies or NGOs cannot give valuable information. However, we should be aware of the limitations that are inherent in these data; generalizations in terms of mechanisms are likely to bear greater interest than generalizations in terms of basic characteristics such as age or educational level. For instance, most of the

women assisted in rehabilitation programmes in the countries of origin contact the organization on their own initiative. We believe it is reasonable to assume that women similar to the “typical” trafficking victims presented in campaigns and in media in general will find it easier to seek assistance, compared with women with different experiences. In particular, victims of trafficking who knew they were going to work in the sex industry, or had prior prostitution experience (the “unworthy” or “guilty” victims) are likely to be underrepresented. Data on victims identified through NGOs or rehabilitation programmes should consequently not be used to infer about, for example, the share of victims who knew they were going to work in prostitution before they left their country of origin (see for instance, IOM Kosovo, 2001; IOM Tajikistan, 2001; IOM Armenia, 2001). However, such data may hold great opportunities for improving our understanding of *trafficking mechanisms* through comparative analyses, i.e. methods of recruitment, acceptance of coercion, or success in social re-integration comparing women with and without prior prostitution experiences.

Estimations and data on populations where victims constitute a subpopulation

A possible solution to the selection biases discussed above would be to study populations where victims of trafficking make up a subpopulation, such as areas where trafficking is known to take place (areas with prostitution or migrant workers) or among returned migrants in known countries of origin.

If survey data on returned migrants were able to distinguish victims of trafficking from non-victims, this information could serve to evaluate the quality of data obtained through other sources, and possibly provide guidelines about how official migration data could be used for monitoring purposes. Furthermore, such data would enable us to identify groups that are particularly vulnerable to traffickers. The majority of known victims of trafficking seem to have chosen to travel abroad, either to find a job, a husband, seek asylum, or even to earn money in prostitution. And while many migrants do fall victim to trafficking, it is probable that the majority of migrants who cross borders every day are not manipulated and exploited to the extent that it can be classified as trafficking. Obtaining a better understanding of the experiences of returned migrants would thus help us better understand what constitutes successful migration, and which factors increase vulnerability to traffickers.

In addition, knowledge about the operation of, and changes in, prostitution arenas could provide invaluable information. Women operating in known areas for prostitution can relatively easily be observed and counted. Even women in situations of serious exploitation and abuse can never be totally invisible in the prostitution arena, as their organizers need to sell the women to clients.

While it is possible to obtain information about general background characteristics and behaviour of migrants in prostitution, we do not believe it is possible to collect reliable information about forms of exploitation and abuse among victims *currently* experiencing this abuse. In other words, it is difficult to develop reliable, direct measures that can enable us to distinguish victims of trafficking from other women in prostitution because women and men in the most serious forms of slavery and exploitation may be less likely to be reached, and because the victims will be reluctant to provide information that may put them in jeopardy (either due to fear of organizers, or due to fear of being sent out of the country). Still, indirect indicators of social integration, freedom of movement, or even coercion may be obtained through, for instance, information about contact with and knowledge about health care or legal institutions in the country where they work, language proficiency, or even the number of respondents stopped from participating in interviews by a third party.

Prostitution arenas, and other arenas for migrant workers, should be monitored, not only in order to obtain statistics on victims of trafficking in destination countries, but also in order to increase our understanding of the mechanism that enables trafficking to take place. This relates to other aspects of the role of destination countries, such as the issues of demand of migrant labour/prostitution, the effect of regulation or deregulation of use of migrant labour/prostitution, and the general framework that may discourage trafficking or make it profitable. Stories of recruitment and exit of women and men in less serious situations of force and exploitation may also serve to enhance our understanding of how trafficking takes place. By supplementing studies based on data on persons detected by law enforcement or NGOs, with data on persons who experienced less severe forms of exploitation, one could obtain a wider description of the field and counteract probable biases in the current body of research. Our data from Oslo indicate that most prostitutes of non-Norwegian origin operate with some form of “assistance” or dependence of organizers and pimps. Only by studying this group can we determine where the line should be drawn between trafficking and non-coerced prostitution

SECONDARY DATA SOURCES

The key respondent approach to arriving at estimates and describing populations is commonly used in empirical studies on human trafficking today (see for instance UNICEF, 2003; IOM, 1996a). This approach is, however, associated with several sources of bias (Heckathorn, 1997). First of all, because numbers and estimates arrived at by expert opinions or involved NGOs cannot be subject to methodological scrutiny or evaluations of external actors, numbers are given

weight not based on the methods used to arrive at them (i.e. registration methods, update frequency, or coverage), but based on the authority of the person or organization that provided the estimate.

Secondly, key informants do not interact with a random group of potential clients, and, in particular for hidden populations, key respondents cannot be expected to have an overview of the total population. Few outreach organizations or community workers have adequate systems for keeping registers, and where methodologically trained researchers fail in producing estimates, it should not be expected that community workers do better, even if they have excellent knowledge of the arenas in which they work.

Even if several independent actors present similar numbers to estimate the number of trafficking victims, this should not be taken to indicate that the number is correct, as key respondents in the same field may be influenced by each other, or the same sources of information, media coverage, or general perception in the society. As mentioned above, the introduction of the Plan of Action for Combating Trafficking in Women and Children in Norway had a significant impact in changing the perceptions of many involved actors. In the two years since the plan was introduced, police, researchers, and community workers have changed their description of human trafficking in Norway from a minor problem to one of growing proportions. This perception has been strengthened by the strong increase in detected trafficking cases, and several ongoing court cases. We would expect that most involved actors would estimate the number of trafficking victims to be much higher today than only a few years ago, although there is little indication of an equally strong increase in the actual occurrences of human trafficking in this time period. We will, therefore, argue that in order to obtain good data it is necessary to limit the use of secondary data sources, and instead conduct systematic collection and analysis of primary data.

Estimation and data collection approaches for hidden and difficult to reach populations

In other fields where necessary statistics have been difficult to obtain, methods for developing process indicators of various phenomena based on more easily available data have been developed. For instance, Garfield (2000) estimates child mortality in Iraq from measures of adult literacy, immunization coverage, and percentage of households with potable water, among other indicators. Such an estimation was made possible by decades of thorough research on child mortality conducted in regions where data are more readily available. Since the main causes of child mortality are known, and tend to be consistent across regions and cultures, process indicators could be used to estimate the extent of child mortality in Iraq.

Is it possible to develop methods for using process indicators on the extent and forms of trafficking? Probably, but the current knowledge base is still far from the point where this is possible, as proper production and analysis of statistical data on human trafficking is still rare. Process indicators can be used for estimating the number of victims of trafficking only after the subject has been systematically researched to the extent that causes and related phenomena are well established, and the effects of these phenomena can be calculated and used across regions and political systems.

While compiling data about hidden populations such as victims of trafficking is both technically challenging and potentially costly, a number of methods have been developed to study such populations. One estimation method that has been getting increased attention in more recent studies of hidden populations is the Capture-Recapture methodology, which was, like many other methods for estimating hidden or difficult to reach populations, developed within the field of biology. With the Capture-Recapture methodology, size and basic characteristics of a population can be estimated based on systematic observations and relatively simple calculations (Jensen and Meredith, 2002). The method is still most commonly used within the fields of biology and epidemiology, however, there has been an increasing amount of studies making use of capture-recapture methodology within the social sciences on subjects such as the homeless (Williams and Cheal, 2002), drug misuse prevalence (Hay and McKeganey, 1996), street children (Gurgel et al., 2004; Hatløy and Huser, forthcoming), and women in street prostitution (Brunovskis and Tyldum, 2004).

Another set of data collection methods commonly used for hidden populations are various types of network approaches. In a study conducted by IOM in Azerbaijan, victims of trafficking and persons assumed to be potential victims were recruited through “snowball recruitment” in seven regions with high international migration (IOM, 2002). It is interesting to note that this study presented findings with victim profiles that sometimes differ significantly from findings presented in studies based on interviews with women recruited from rehabilitation centres. However, despite the innovative recruitment method, it is difficult to determine to what extent the characteristics found are representative for the population of victims/survivors at large, as the recruitment, or snowballing, was not carried out in a way that gives all respondents equal inclusion probabilities, nor allows calculation of such probabilities (at least, such methods are not described in the report). Estimation methods based on snowball sampling generally demand a systematic recruitment system (i.e. that each respondent can recruit a fixed number of respondents, and that a fixed number of waves are carried out), and ideally the initial contacts should be based on a random sample, or at least some form of targeted sampling.

Another network approach that has received increased attention for studies of hidden populations is Respondent-Driven Sampling (RDS), developed by Douglas Heckathorn (1997). Through a double incentive system in recruitment, and estimation methods that take into account the size and characteristics of the individuals network (based on Markov-chain theory and the theory of biased networks) RDS is argued to reduce the biases associated with other network approaches.⁴

CONCLUSIONS

Current data sources where victims of trafficking can be unambiguously identified (i.e. data from law enforcement and rehabilitation centres) do not cover more than a small proportion of the total population of victims of trafficking. The populations that are covered are most likely marked by strong selection bias, and are not representative of the total population of victims. Due to a lack of empirical knowledge about causes and mechanisms tied to trafficking, proxy (or process) indicators such as poverty, migration patterns, or missing persons have limited application for estimating size of the population of trafficking victims.

Any production of data or estimates of victims of trafficking should be based on clear conceptual, but also practical, identification of who the target group is, and who the inferences are valid for. Furthermore, any estimate should clearly state which stage of trafficking is being focused on – whether the target groups are persons at risk of being trafficked, persons recently recruited, persons currently trafficked, or former victims of trafficking.

It is impossible to distinguish victims of trafficking based on external observations, thus, unambiguous classification of victims of trafficking is most easily facilitated if the victims are willing to give up information about exploitation and abuse themselves. For classification in statistics production, this is most easily done through survey data. Survey data of evasive or difficult to reach populations may be difficult and costly to produce. However, halfway solutions will seldom work: the only thing worse than no data is wrong and misleading data.

While the production of reliable statistics and estimations of numbers and characteristics of victims is important for the further development of policies and research on trafficking, the importance of other research topics should not be ignored. In this paper we have considered mainly the statistical aspects of data gathering on victims of trafficking. Although statistical data can be instructive and useful, as we pointed out initially, there is also a need to understand the processes by which men and women experience trafficking; how they are

recruited; how they relate to clients, social services, and law enforcement while in countries of destination; how they get away from a situation of exploitation; and how they are rehabilitated. Furthermore, we need a better understanding of the social field that constitutes trafficking, as well as its bordering fields; i.e. is trafficking best understood as a phenomenon within the field of labour migration, international prostitution, or migration in general, or does trafficking constitute a distinct and separate phenomenon with its separate causes and mechanisms? These questions call for data production and analysis in anthropological and social psychological veins.

Research on trafficking is still in its early stages, and the potential gains from systematic empirical research are large. It should be a goal to move beyond static descriptions of “typical” or “extreme” cases of trafficking, and rather seek to understand the great variation in forms of exploitation, recruitment, and rehabilitation. Comparisons of nationalities and regions as well as social groups should be given priority. High quality data representative for the total population of victims of trafficking are rare, and as they are difficult and costly to produce, will probably continue to be rare in the future. However, minor adjustments toward systematic collection of data (for instance by using probability sampling), and making potential and known biases to the data explicit in the data analysis, could significantly improve the current research base, and as such, our understanding of human trafficking.

NOTES

1. It is also worth noting that Norwegian and other Scandinavian women had the highest refusal rates, while Asian women had the highest participation rate, followed by women from Central and Eastern Europe.
2. “‘Trafficking in persons’ shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the 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 the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person 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 labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (UN, 2000).
3. One case can have several involved persons – of the above mentioned 42 cases, the largest case involves 124 persons.
4. For more information on sampling methods for hidden and rare populations, see Heckathorn, 1997; Thompson, 1992; Jensen and Pearson, 2002; Levy and Lemenshow, 1999; Pedersen and Sommerfelt, 2001.

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