



## The Ethics of Fighting Human Trafficking

It is astonishing how ancient evils can “modernize” and emerge again. Slavery was legally abolished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in most of the world, but diverse new forms of slavery, falling under the general heading of human trafficking, are a growing contemporary plague. I am very pleased to highlight in this essay the work of one of our NCBC board members, Deb O’Hara-Rusckowski, and the organization she helped found: [Global Strategic Operatives for the Eradication of Human Trafficking](#).

There are various kinds of human trafficking in our world. The United Nations gives a complete definition, which the Holy See and the Sovereign Order of Malta helped to formulate, as part of what is known as the [Palermo Protocol](#).

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 labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

It is heartbreaking to realize that millions of people are being exploited sexually, having organs taken for transplantation without their consent, and being forced to work in conditions of slavery.

Making the ethical case that we must fight against the tremendous injustice of human trafficking is easy. What is more complicated to discern where our ethical responsibilities lie in the struggle. One thing that helps is to be aware of the scale of the problem. I attended a presentation given by O’Hara-Rusckowski this past weekend. She pointed out that the estimated numbers of trafficked persons has grown tremendously in recent years, up to nearly [50 million people](#). This includes those forced into marriages against their will. Human trafficking is also a crime that is very profitable both in the USA and abroad, which contributes to the expanding number of victims. It is also difficult to identify — and even dangerous to rescue — persons from the clutches of their captors.

So, what can be done?

Global Strategic Operatives has hit upon an interesting strategy. It started with the observation that health care workers, particularly those who work in emergency rooms or in ambulance services, have real opportunities to identify and offer help to trafficked persons. One [study](#) found that nearly 88% of the trafficked women and girls surveyed had sought medical care or treatment while they were being victimized. Many simply pass through the system without the

doctors, nurses, etc., realizing what is going on. O'Hara-Rusckowski and her organization specialize in providing training for health workers to identify and offer assistance to trafficked persons. Several health systems in the USA and other countries have made this kind of training a priority.

There is also a huge need for facilities that can take in and help heal those who have been rescued from the pimps or others who controlled them. O'Hara-Rusckowski has been working to set up new centers with a strong emphasis on having religious sisters as part of the care team. She is supporting the establishment of a facility in the Boston area with Catholic religious sisters from Nigeria.

One of the enormous ethical problems associated with human trafficking is forced abortions for the sexually exploited women and girls. There are testimonies of survivors relating that they were coerced into having multiple abortions over a period of years. One study showed almost 30% going to Planned Parenthood. Unfortunately, some who are involved in programs to help trafficked persons favor abortion for rescued women found to be pregnant. There are even requirements tied to some government funding to assist trafficked women to obtain abortions. This is ethically unacceptable and highlights the need for faithful Catholic-inspired groups like Global Strategic Operatives to provide truly life-affirming care to victims and never be complicit with abortions.

The worst region of the world for human trafficking in terms of sheer numbers is Asia. There, many of the supply chains for the products we buy are tainted by forced labor, but it is a global problem. Just documenting the scale of the abuses is daunting from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. An example is this US Department of Labor's "[List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor](#)." It would be simply overwhelming to investigate every item we buy, so we do not have a moral obligation to do so. The practical ethical advice is to educate oneself about the problem and raise awareness among others. Making conscientious efforts to avoid the worst offenders in terms of goods and regions of production, like Xinxiang in China, is a laudable step. Supporting the admirable efforts in fighting human trafficking, such as that of noted pro-life [Congressman Chris Smith](#) of New Jersey, is another concrete action we can take.

In the area of the trafficking of organs, we must follow the strict ethical principle that organs for transplantation be procured only by a free donation. This is why it is not advisable to seek organ transplantation in countries where there is a possibility that persons may have been coerced or paid to give up an organ. There are reports of organ trafficking around the world, but it seems most prevalent in Asia.

Please pray and act to fight human trafficking in all its forms. [Pope Francis](#) called it "an open wound in the body of Christ, in the body of all humanity, it is a deep wound that also affects each one of us."