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Editorial: Unraveling human trafficking dynamics amidst mixed migration and global crises

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[Unraveling human trafficking dynamics amidst mixed migration and global crises](#)

Over recent decades, trafficking in persons has become a very dramatic issue in the context of international migration. This has led to the adoption of relevant international and regional binding and political instruments aimed at combating its rise and protecting the victims involved, starting with the UN Palermo Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, which supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, adopted in 2000. Trafficking remains a pressing global issue, recognized as a grave crime and a grave violation of human rights. Due to its dynamic character and ability to adapt to changing socio-political conditions, trafficking in persons is a reality within irregular migration flows, creating complex scenarios where voluntary migration is overshadowed by coercion and vulnerability. The world of migration is a vast and diverse landscape. Migration routes and the composition of migrant populations have diversified, with new connections forming between countries and regions. These emerging trends and actors play a crucial role in shaping the current landscape of human mobility, regardless of individuals' legal status. Recent studies highlight the persistent overlap between trafficking and irregular migration, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding and response strategies. However, current legal frameworks and policy responses often fail to capture the complexity of trafficking, focusing instead on repressive measures against irregular migration—particularly starting from the adoption of a very restrictive framework for international protection. Victims of severe exploitation are often third-country migrants who arrive irregularly in a destination country, not necessarily as trafficked persons from the outset but exposed to a high risk of subjugation due to their legal status, the vulnerabilities arising from their living conditions, and the forms of control they experience in repaying the debt incurred to migrate. Moreover, restrictive legal and political frameworks limit migrants' rights and freedom of movement, undermining their social capital and resources throughout the migration process. Upon arrival in destination countries, migrants face ongoing challenges due to the lack of responsive public policies addressing their needs in areas such as housing, economic opportunities, legal status, and access to social services. Consequently, their human rights are frequently disregarded. This gap underscores the necessity for a more comprehensive approach that considers the multifaceted nature of trafficking and the diverse profiles of victims, moving beyond stereotypical narratives to embrace the full spectrum of human rights violations involved.

This Research Topic convenes a series of investigations into trafficking in persons, scrutinizing the evolving dynamics, particularly in the context of mixed migration flows and recent international crises, to uncover the underlying mechanisms that perpetuate this crime and its impact on victims. The goal is to generate a deeper understanding of the factors shaping trafficking and to identify effective strategies for prevention and protection, with a focus on human rights.

The manuscripts in this thematic Research Topic offer examples of the variety of issues that can potentially affect outcomes in relation to human trafficking, analyzing specific aspects or implications of this phenomenon through different methodologies and across various regions of the world, without being confined to domestic perspectives. This Research Topic, composed of four essays, brings together research writings across various disciplines to examine how trafficking as a political, legal, sociological, and medical issue requires responses that are both local and international, sector-specific and holistic.

Following the essays, the first one titled “*PEARR Tool Training and Implementation: Building Awareness of Violence and Human Trafficking in a Hospital System*,” and authored by [Roe-Sepowitz et al.](#), illustrates the PEARR Tool—which stands for Provide Privacy, Educate, Ask, Respect, and Respond. It is a recognized screening and response guide developed in the United States to assist healthcare providers in offering trauma-sensitive care to individuals who may be affected by violence, including human trafficking victims. This essay presents the first formal evaluation of the PEARR Tool in hospital settings. The findings of the survey revealed a general increase in staff awareness regarding human trafficking and a significant improvement in familiarity with the PEARR Tool. However, despite increased awareness, the majority of respondents had not used the tool during the study period. Among those who did use the PEARR Tool, there was a notable rise in reported ease of use and perceived utility when supporting affected patients. The PEARR Tool suggests that it is a promising approach to identifying and assisting victims of human trafficking in clinical settings.

The second manuscript, “*Toward effective protection of victims in mixed migration flows: referral mechanisms shaped on the specific needs of the person*,” written by [Nicodemi and Cirillo](#) analyzes how traditional legal categories such as “victims,” “asylum seekers,” and “refugees” are increasingly interlinked and insufficient to fully capture the multifaceted nature of individual experiences and vulnerabilities in relation to the and early and prompt identification of the real characteristics of the individual migration project and identity. The authors present developments in Italy involving promising practices aimed at enhancing coordination between asylum and anti-trafficking systems within the context of mixed migration flows. Notably, specific Guidelines for Asylum Authorities have been introduced to enable the preliminary identification of potential trafficking victims during the asylum process and to facilitate their access to protection measures.

To align with the provisions of the European Directive 2011/36/EU and its integration into national law, these Guidelines have established a referral mechanism between asylum authorities and anti-trafficking entities—an approach considered unique within the European context. This manuscript seeks to outline this good practice, evaluating its implementation and legal impact while also addressing its limitations.

Another manuscript written by [Baglay and Atak](#) is an Original Research article titled “*Data Collection and Reporting on Human Trafficking in Canada*”. It explores the challenges of data collection in Canada’s anti-human trafficking efforts, with a focus on identifying existing statistical sources and encouraging dialogue around data accuracy and accessibility. The analysis reveals that current datasets are predominantly crime-focused, underscoring the need for more comprehensive and nuanced data practices. The manuscript employs a conceptual framework grounded in open government principles, emphasizing the importance of transparency, data accessibility, and Access to Information (ATI) mechanisms for fostering democratic accountability and public engagement. Structured in four sections, the article outlines international standards for human trafficking data collection; frames the issue within the context of open government values; examines the unique challenges of data reporting in Canada; and shares practical insights from the authors’ own data collection efforts through ATI requests. In conclusion, this perspective article raises critical questions to guide future improvements in human trafficking data collection and reporting, calling for a shift toward more transparent, inclusive, and policy-relevant data systems.

To close this review, “*The new slave trade in Libya: evaluating the modern humanitarian crisis (2015–2024)*” by [Lahai](#) discusses critical issues regarding the role of Libya in relation to the treatment experienced by a multitude of migrants crossing this country during their journey. It is evident that modern slavery in Libya, exemplified by the commodification of migrants in detention centers and open-air slave markets, reflects deep-seated global inequalities and geopolitical complicity. This qualitative study employs a Marxist analytical framework, using Libya as a case study and drawing on reports from NGOs and IGOs—including the IOM, MSE, and HRW—to expose how neoliberal capitalism, imperialist interventions, and entrenched racial hierarchies sustain contemporary human trafficking.

Following NATO’s 2011 intervention and the toppling of Gaddafi, Libya’s welfare infrastructure collapsed, enabling armed militias to seize control of oil resources—accounting for 85% of the country’s national revenue—and to exploit migration routes for profit. Between 2017 and 2023, EU migration policies directed €455 million to Libyan militias, which intercepted over 38,000 migrants at sea. This collaboration coincided with systemic human rights abuses, including torture and forced labor, affecting 73% of intercepted migrants. During the same period, fatalities among those attempting to cross the Mediterranean rose sharply, reaching a rate of 1 in 23. Through a Marxist lens, sub-Saharan Africans, often displaced by IMF-imposed austerity measures and climate-related crises, are positioned as a global “reserve army of labor”—vulnerable, exploitable, and rendered disposable under global capitalism. Racial capitalism compounds this vulnerability, with Black migrants disproportionately subjected to enslavement and abuse. Corporate complicity, such as ENI’s oil extraction operations enabled through trafficker partnerships, underscores the transnational nature of exploitation. In response, the study advocates for structural reforms, including redirecting EU funds toward climate resilience in the Sahel; prosecuting traffickers and complicit corporations through mechanisms such as the ICC and Magnitsky sanctions;

strengthening local governance and civil society; expanding legal migration pathways; and enforcing binding corporate accountability standards.

To conclude, the articles in this Research Topic explore different aspects of the migration phenomenon, particularly focusing on trafficking from different angles of observation. The articles range from theoretical and empirical analyses to addressing specific issues and single-country case studies.

Author contributions

PD: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships

that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. Gen AI was used to translate and rephrase some sentences in English language.

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