ITALY, HUMAN TRAFFICKING, AND THE REFUGEE CRISIS: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS TO CONSIDER IN COMBATTING ABUSE OF DISPLACED PERSONS

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In the midst of the “refugee crisis,” refugee women, and especially refugee children who are en route to and living in Europe are extremely vulnerable to human trafficking. Many sources report that the refugee crisis is a perfect situation for human traffickers, as traffickers have almost unlimited access to displaced people who are largely unprotected by European countries. More specifically, human trafficking problems faced by Italy have been on the rise in recent years because human traffickers use the Mediterranean Sea and the refugee crisis to their benefit; because of this, Italy is a prime “destination, transit, and source country for women, children, and men subjected to sex trafficking and forced labor” (U.S. Department of State, 2016). Though the E.U. and Italy itself have created initiatives against the human trafficking situation and are doing more to combat sex trafficking in the Mediterranean, there is still much to be done to improve the situation for displaced persons who run the risk of being trafficked.

This paper discusses current issues surrounding refugees targeted by human traffickers in Italy and provides policy suggestions on both the national and supranational levels to ameliorate the Italian sex trafficking problem. Above all, the idea that the EU and Italy need to be more effective in their teamwork together against this challenge is stressed. Policy suggestions essentially encourage Italy and the EU to improve upon standing policies and institutions to move past a period of stagnation and marginal progress into a time when the EU and Italy can work in tandem to best combat sex trafficking on the ground level. Focusing on making positive change on the ground level will avoid webs of vague policies that only deal in political influence; future changes made must focus on real people first and foremost, even if that would mean a shift in how the EU and Italy are going about addressing human trafficking in conjunction with the refugee crisis at present.

Key Words: Refugee crisis, Italy, Human Trafficking, EU.
Human Trafficking, Italy, and the Refugee Crisis: A Situation Explained

Today, Italy is a prime “destination, transit, and source country for women, children, and men subjected to sex trafficking and forced labor” and “NGOs and government officials [have] reported [that] the number of trafficking victims in Italy increased significantly due to the dramatic rise in migrants and asylum-seekers arriving by boat from sub-Saharan Africa” (U.S. Department of State, 2016). Indeed, it is a well-known fact that displaced persons involved in what is called the “refugee crisis” are most vulnerable to human trafficking, as traffickers see that they can use a displaced person’s vulnerability for their own profit (Rankin 2016; Buchan 2016; European Commission, 2016); Italy is especially key in this trafficking process, as it is in the perfect location to be used as a transfer point for trafficking victims and is in a choice position for traffickers to do business there. The reason for this is because it is open to ships in the Mediterranean, is close to Eastern European states that are prominent in the Human trafficking industry, and was already a crucial location for the Nigerian prostitution industry in the past (U.S. Department of State, 2016; Cupolo, 2016; Kelley and Tondo, 2016). This paper will focus more narrowly on women and children coming to Italy in light of sex trafficking, but will offer solutions that can benefit a wide range of at-risk refugees in the asylum-seeking process in Italy.

These two marginalized groups, refugee women and children, have need of further attention because, “Children have become a preferred target for traffickers,” and “at least 10,000 unaccompanied children have dropped off the radar of official agencies since arriving in Europe” (Rankin, 2016). With that, according to the United Nations, “the trafficking of migrants was reaching ‘appalling dimensions,’ with the global number of trafficked children more than
doubling to 28% in 2014 up from 13% in 2004” (Euractiv.com and Reuters, 2016). And, on a more national level, in Italy:

A study conducted by the international non-governmental organization Save the Children [of Italy] looked at links between unaccompanied minors and trafficking in persons. It indicated that many of these children end up in sexual exploitation (West African girls), forced labour and begging (North African and South Asian boys), or exploited in city markets or in the streets to pay back the debt their families incurred for their travel to Europe. (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2016)

As the number of refugees to Europe continues to rise, we are finding that children are among the most at-risk of experiencing sexual violence and exploitation.

Furthermore, regarding women, “Over three quarters of the registered victims [of human trafficking] are women (76%)” and women are “increasingly representing a larger percentage of refugees” (European Commission, 2016; De Bode, 2015). Also, the European Union (EU) has recognized that refugee women have become exceedingly open to exploitation and violence when they stated, “Some [asylum-seeking women] have been raped, beaten or sexually exploited during their journey, while others flee gender-based violence in their home countries. They are arriving in Europe in need of gender-sensitive support, which we must provide” (European Commission, 2015). From the preceding information, it can be deduced that, if the EU wishes to combat trafficking of human beings, they must adopt solutions that will directly affect women and children refugees, as women and children are the most susceptible to human trafficking.

Even more specifically, policies working against exploiting vulnerable people should focus on sex trafficking, as “sexual exploitation is the most widespread form” of trafficking in Europe (European Commission, 2016).
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As mentioned previously, Italy is a particular cause for concern as a result of its geographical situation and recent history. That is why, today, the trafficking of women and children is especially prevalent there; in fact, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has produced some very telling literature on this subject:

76 percent of almost 1,400 migrants and refugees interviewed in Italy from 24th of June to 3rd August 2016 – and who travelled along the Central Mediterranean Route connecting North Africa to Europe – have responded positively to at least one indicator of the presence of human trafficking and other exploitative practices on the route. (IOM, 2016)

Such a high percentage should not be tolerated and needs to be addressed via policy plans that will directly affect refugees on the ground level—this will be discussed at length in a later section of the paper. Along with that, “Italy is the main corridor for trafficking girls from Nigeria to Europe” and “has been at the forefront of migration flows into Europe” (GRETA, 2016). And just last year the IOM reported on two of the most unsettling trends in refugee and migrant movement to Italy, stating that approximately 80% of about 13,000 children without escorts and the same percentage of over 5,000 Nigerian women were trafficked (IOM, 2016). In the past few years, Italy has not been able to keep up with growing rates of human trafficking and, as such, is in need of better, more streamlined support from the EU and more solid national institutions for receiving refugees in the country. Both the EU and Italy have tried implementing policies and allocating monies to help alleviate these issues, but the challenges for refugees continue to escalate.

Indeed, there is an ever-increasing problem in Italy and in Europe with human trafficking as the “refugee crisis” continues to expand, and this is an issue that requires consistent effort
from European countries and the EU as a collective. For the purposes of this paper, weaknesses of the Italian government and the EU in attempts to resolve the problem of trafficking refugee women and children into sex work will be addressed in order to offer viable policy suggestions that can help relieve the suffering of many displaced people in Italy if implemented correctly.

**Sex Trafficking in Italy: are the EU and Italy doing enough?**

At present, Italy and the EU are working together on initiatives to help lessen the problem of human trafficking in the thick of overwhelming numbers of refugees coming into Italy from diverse parts of the world. However, despite this fact, the EU and Italy’s efforts have not been the most effective. Regarding this systemic failure of sorts, it has been noted that, “Even a mature supra-national organisation such as the European Union has no fixed legal response to sex work or trafficking” (Aluko-Daniels, 2016) and that “the main problem [with human trafficking in the EU is] the lack of coordination between member states, with cities, regions, and even reception centres devising their own protocols to deal with lone child migrants who are at risk” (Euractiv.com and Reuters, 2016). Thus, it can be said that there has been some policymaking failure by the EU and its member states that has hindered Europe’s progress in combatting trafficking of vulnerable refugees. In this section of the paper, attempts of the EU and Italy to eradicate human trafficking worsened by the refugee crisis will be mentioned to set the stage for concrete policy suggestions that could have a hand in changing the Italy’s present out-of-control situation.

To begin, there is Operation Sophia, which is an EU effort supported by Italian troops that is essentially meant to keep traffickers and smugglers from coming into Italy from Africa. This directive was to be accomplished by putting naval forces run by EU nations in the
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Mediterranean to “[gather] information, [rescue] migrants, and [destroy] boats used by smugglers” and falls under the EU’s External Action Services (EUNAVFOR MED; Tardy, 2015; Lords Select Committee, 2016). Although Operation Sophia may sound like a great potential solution to a wider issue of trafficking persons, “A mission acting only on the high seas is not able to disrupt effectively the smuggling networks. There is therefore little prospect of Operation Sophia overturning the business model of people smuggling” (Lords Select Committee, 2016). Consequently, though the work of Operation Sophia is commendable and has helped saved many lives, the operation is not enough to attack the central concerns involved in trafficking refugees for the purpose of sex work.

Additionally, because prostitution is legal in Italy (U.S. Department of State, 2008) and because “there are no common provisions on sex trade at the EU level,” to regulate sex trade in Italy besides an EU Court ruling that prostitution is “an economic activity as a self-employed person” (Danna, 2014), Italy has become an especially profitable and fitting place where traffickers are inclined to send their victims. The logic here of legalizing prostitution in a country that strictly prohibits sex trafficking is undeniably contradictory in nature because, with the mouth of the government, Italy is right there along with the EU is telling sex traffickers to get out of Italy, but then Italian laws allow for a huge market that sex traffickers cannot miss. At the same time though, if prostitution is made illegal, matters may become worse for Italy, as illegalizing prostitution could create a situation for victims of trafficking to be lost in a black market rather than in plain sight of the Italian government (Aluko-Daniels, 2016).

This brings up yet another point that refugees in Italy, because they are not properly integrated, must often turn to crime. Of this, a refugee from Eritrea said, “‘In Italy, if you go straight, you die … You have to go crooked and weave like a snake to survive’” (Cupolo, 2016).
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What is more, “For refugees in Rome, ‘going crooked’ can mean anything from selling prostitution services for as little as five euros a client to pursuing a myriad of criminal activities, all consequences of a broken integration system” (Cupolo, 2016). Another aspect of the broken Italian integration system is that “Asylum-seekers, who are unable to legally work while their applications are reviewed, often sought employment in informal sectors, increasing their vulnerability to trafficking.” Moreover, “More than one-third of the approximately 18,000 unaccompanied minors who arrived in Italy in 2015 left their protected communities to work, beg, or journey northwards, increasing their vulnerability” (U.S. Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2016). The EU and Italy have made it clear that, politically, everything possible is being done to combat these issues but, despite existing efforts, it would seem that refugees in Italy are forced into criminal behavior due to poor integration on the behalf of Italian and EU programs that do not fit the bill.

Although, this is not to ignore the fact that many women and girls, especially from Nigeria, are pulled into Italy by sex traffickers in the first place by way of manipulation with voodoo, economic incentives, and other means, but are not told exactly what they are signing up for (Kelley and Tondo, 2016; Aluko-Daniels, 2016). Correspondingly, in the cases of many Nigerian women who make agreements to go to Italy, “Female victims are often subjected to sex trafficking in Italy after accepting promises of employment as waitresses, dancers, singers, models, or caregivers” (U.S. Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2016) and, far too frequently, when these females move to Italy, they are left with no choice but to work as a prostitute for terrible compensation.

Even more disappointing is the fact that many instances when women and children alike are trapped into prostitution occur in reception centers; these centers, though built for the
purposes of keeping refugees safe, are often optimal places for sex traffickers to pick up their prey. The *Guardian* published an article about this, saying that “reception centres are not good places for trafficked women. Just last week six girls went missing from a reception centre in Sicily, they were just picked up in a car and driven away” (Kelley and Tondo, 2016). Furthermore, “Salvatore Vella, the deputy chief prosecutor in Agrigento, Sicily, who led the first significant investigation of Nigerian trafficking rings in Italy in 2014, said that the reception centres are increasingly being used as pick-up points by those intending to exploit Nigerian women” (Kelley and Tondo, 2016). Not only is this an issue, but so is the fact that Italy lacks *enough* reception centers to accommodate all of the refugees coming in. Although, if the reception centers lack the structure necessary to practice preventative measures for human trafficking, how can putting more reception centers in solve current problems?

Being that putting in more reception centers seems like the logical solution from an outsider’s perspective, the IOM recently offered a potential solution to improve Italy’s methods for fighting trafficking of women and children, which was to increase the amount of reception centers for refugees to Italy. A main reason why this is a logical proposition is because “international organizations [have] reported increased incidents of labor and sex trafficking of asylum-seekers as a *direct result of shelter shortages.*” (U.S. Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2016). However, as previously mentioned, even this solution seems difficult to implement in a time when reception centers themselves are used as hotspots for trafficking targeting women and when Italy and the EU are not putting enough funding towards making reception centers better and more abundant.

Then, there is the issue of the EU neglecting to make their actions consistent with their public statements about human trafficking and the refugee crisis. In a statement from 2016, the
European Commission declared that, “Increasing the number of investigations and prosecutions on trafficking in human beings is one of the key priorities of the EU legal and policy framework” (European Commission, 2016). Despite the publicized initiative to improve this aspect of EU, various member states’ failure to protect displaced people from human trafficking. Though this is true, because this paper’s scope is focused on Italy, it is important to note that “[in Italy] investigations and prosecutions [about human trafficking cases] decreased, government-supported NGOs remained severely underfunded, many victims among vulnerable groups went unidentified, and there remained a significant lack of government coordination on anti-trafficking efforts” (U.S. Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2016). If the EU hopes to eradicate the trafficking of human beings, they need to focus on the progress of each of their countries in the realm of investigation; in this case, Italy needs that extra push from a supranational organization (the EU) that is is not getting.

Also, the EU and Italy should recognize that their systems of funding need to be improved in order to allocate monies to more effective causes for stopping human trafficking. That is, the EU has thrown millions of euros into ideas to stop sex trafficking throughout the refugee crisis, but the money they are giving is does not have enough of an impact on the ground level. For example, the EU has put together a monetarily powerful fund called the “Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF),” which is actually too broad in its initiatives and needs to focus more on viable solutions dedicated to helping real people suffering from the sex trafficking issue than on simply proposing streams of nebulous policies. Notwithstanding the fact that these are noble purposes for EU monies, further analysis the AMIF’s website indicates that the fund lacks the specificity necessary to make lasting change and, although it is wise that the fund allows for the EU states to share 88% of the management of AMIF’s resources, a lot of
the resources simply end up going to more bureaucratic pursuits in which refugees are primarily talked about rather than helped in real ways.

Additionally, the funds covered under the AMIF umbrella—namely the European Refugee Fund and the European Integration Fund—do not focus enough on children and sex trafficking of refugees, and the real world implementation of these funds seems vague at best and requires further cooperation on the part of all participating EU member states in the realm of making common EU legislation that will allow the funds to be more effective. In the case of Italy, this would mean working more closely with EU countries to create stronger and EU-wide rules to make rates of sex trafficking go down. Doing do will allow EU member states to work in solidarity against human trafficking.

As well as this fund, in 2015 alone, the “European Commission … allocated about €8 million in projects preventing and combating violence against women and girls within the EU and €20 million in fighting against harmful practices abroad” under a directive to eliminate violence against women (European Commission, 2015). There have been other funds created to help refugee women and children at-risk of trafficking, but naming all of them would make this essay much longer than necessary. That said, if there is so much money going into causes that should and pronounce to protect refugee women and children, why then do the rates of sex trafficking in said marginalized groups continue to increase in places like Italy? Perhaps it is because the the EU and Italy continue to underfund NGOs on the grassroots level; also, “NGOs expressed concerns that EU monies are increasingly being spent on border security, rather than fighting poverty and inequality” (Gotev, 2015). There is merit in working with NGOs with goals geared towards finding feasible answers to the rising sex trafficking problem in Italy, as NGOs do not have to work as closely with corrupt governments as, say, Italian institutions would have
to do. And directly funding said NGOs more in Italy could potentially help a lot of people who are vulnerable to trafficking without having resources go first through umbrella funds, committees, the Italian government, etc., which could potentially halt spending of funds at a point where they are used more for debating about refugees than on women and children trapped in a system of being trafficked and abused.

**Italy, Refugees, and Sex Trafficking: Proposed Solutions for the EU and Italy**

This paper echoes the sentiment that “il fenomeno migratorio, che impegna sotto vari profili ogni continente, sia come meta di destinazione sia come area di passaggio o di partenza, non può essere gestito da un singolo Stato, ma deve essere affrontato in un contesto necessariamente sovranazionale” (Cherubini et al, 2016). What the preceding statement means is that it is not and should not be the responsibility of any single member state of the EU to solve all of the issues that come with the migration crisis. And, though this type of statement calls for serious action on the part of the EU, it also notes that, as sovereign nations, EU states such as Italy must do their bit to contribute to accomplishing the goals outlined in the statements on human trafficking that the EU publishes. In the following paragraphs, there will be a few policy suggestions that are meant to assist the EU in lessening the evils of sex trafficking in Italy. These policy suggestions, though detailed, will focus on a few select areas of improvement to emphasize that the EU needs to simplify its scope in order to make concrete, sustainable change.

At present, as touched upon earlier, the EU is putting money into countless ambiguously run funds across the Union as a solution to growth rate of trafficking amidst the refugee crisis. This web of funding is not doing much for the Italian effort and is instead mistakenly transferring too much money into idealistic, detached efforts. To remedy the issues here, the EU needs to
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consolidate monies going back to Italy to fight human trafficking and gender parity issues revolving around refugees into one or two goal-driven funds that are cognizant of the Italian situation. If member states come to an agreement about programming funding systems and can consolidate monies into country packages, such as that proposed for Italy, for refugee development instead of into a plethora of diverse funds, there could be a distinct possibility of seeing more success with initiating the breakdown of sex trafficking as it is now. Also, country packages would still be overseen and regulated and would require reporting systems, but rather than report to respective funds within the EU, country representatives would report to the European Commission on the progress of the country packages. Reporting on progress of countries in alleviating struggles faced by refugee women and children would both point out deficiencies in country plans while celebrating successes and giving good examples for other countries to use in their plans to help refugees.

Moreover, money going from the EU to Italy should be streamlined into purposes of assisting and integrating refugees through grassroots efforts for eradicating human trafficking by concentrating on legitimate NGOs. Distributing EU and Italian funds to NGOs dealing with sex trafficking and exploitation to “provide adequate long-term funding to NGOs assisting victims” would give organizations on the ground level the means necessary to make a difference in the lives of actual people—most notably refugee women and children (U.S. Department of State, 2016). In particular, sufficient funds should be given to Italian NGOs associated with ENPATES, or the European NGOs Platform Against Trafficking Exploitation and Slavery, as this is a body of NGOs that have proven to be effective in working against human trafficking. If other Italy-based NGOs desire funding from the EU, they should first request approval from ENPATES and should be classified by the platform as a “clean” NGO. Classification as being
“clean” is imperative at a time when there exist NGOs that use their status to perpetuate sex trafficking problems under the shroud of being charitable (GEFIRA, 2016). Along a similar vein, this paper also proposes that ENPATES work closely with the EU regarding Italy and that the NGO conglomeration be allotted a specific portion of funds given to Italy from the EU to grant to “clean” Italian NGOs involved in stopping the trafficking of refugees. Overall, this should improve the present exploitation of refugee women and children in both the long and short terms because NGOs are often most helpful on the grassroots level and, with more support from the EU and Italy, should be able to improve and increase the quality and scope of their missions in Italy over time.

On a slightly different thread, the EU should strive to create a firm legal framework responding to sex trafficking and prostitution in the EU. Although, given that there would be issues with simply illegalizing prostitution across the EU, more research would need to be done before any decision is made about the legality of prostitution across all EU states. What can be done in the meantime though in the case of Italy is the EU can work with Italian legislators on a registration and initiative program for prostitutes on Italian soil. That is, Italy should consider repealing the section of its 1958 Merlin Law, which to this day bans the, “registrazione, neanche mediante il rilascio di tessere sanitarie, di donne che esercitano o siano sospettate di esercitare la prostituzione,” or the registration of prostitutes or suspected prostitutes (Legge Merlin, 1958). More research would need to be done to investigate potential repercussions in considering the appellation of this section of the law, but it may generally be a good idea for Italy to start registering prostitutes and noting citizenship status of prostitutes. That way, Italy may be able to keep better track of who of the refugee population is being exploited for sex and where this is occurring, thus giving Italians a sturdier set of leads for investigating the sex trafficking industry.
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The complexities of this situation are realized, however, which is why further research is recommended and should be prioritized above going forward and appealing the law before considering the implications.

Italy also needs to expand on their existing approach to infiltrating the Nigerian sex trafficking business, as this industry of sorts is said to be the hugest culprit of human trafficking on Italian soil. One possible way Italy could improve their tactics is by working with EU monies to build and oversee reception centers set apart for Nigerian migrants. This is important to consider because “the current policy of placing Nigerian women in reception centres along with thousands of other migrants [plays] to the traffickers’ advantage, with women regularly going missing,” making reception centers marketplaces for sex traffickers and the antithesis of safe havens for women and children (Kelley and Tondo, 2016). And simply building more centers will not do, as they have proven to be dangerous for refugees, especially those from Nigeria. Thus, new, diligently surveilled centers supporting Nigerian populations (especially women, girls, and boys) could help Italy face the problems of Nigeria-based sex trafficking through giving more time and attention to a targeted group for sex trafficking.

Stating the above is not to suggest that Nigerian immigrants get special attention over all refugees solely for where they came from, but to acknowledge the fact that Italy must put more focus on its Nigerian migrants if they hope to stay consistent with the EU’s goals to prioritize the eradication of human, and especially sex, trafficking. Accordingly, Italy needs to act expressly against the Nigerian trafficking industry with their resources from their own government and from the EU if they hope to start cleaning up the crime afoot in this refugee crisis.
Italian-EU Teamwork and Hope for the Future

Even though Italy is facing a tremendous challenge at reducing the rates of human trafficking in their country, there is actually much hope for the Italian people in this endeavor. If Italy and the EU are able to work together to 1) recognize the faults in their present strategies and 2) make alterations to policies and programs so said policies and programs can more directly improve the lives of refugee people, Italy will have a much easier time of combatting sex trafficking within their country. Indeed, the EU and Italy have the right resources, time, and power necessary to improve refugees’ lives by fighting against human trafficking in a more effective manner. However, with these tools, they also have the responsibility to make the choice to change the ways in which they are presently going about things in order to make a more decisive turn of events for human traffickers and their victims. That is, what it all comes down to is whether the EU and Italy are willing to work together on initiating new approaches to thwart exploitative sex traffickers and whether they can admit past missteps to move forward to a brighter future. Such a future should without exception include a demonstrated priority for the human rights of women and children en route to Italy amidst the “refugee crisis” in place of idealistic statements and programs that barely miss the mark.
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