

Human Trafficking in Moldova: Rural Residents vs. Urban Residents

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Abstract

Human trafficking is a crime against humanity that affects every nation in the world.¹ Moldova is among one of the countries with the highest rates of human trafficking. Moldovans from rural² areas are the most vulnerable people to human trafficking – because of a lack of awareness, a lower level of education, a lower income, and less access to information, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), The International Organization for Migration (IOM), and LaStrada.³ I hypothesized that the differences between rural and urban⁴ residents are not significant regarding their knowledge of human trafficking, thanks to globalization and larger access to information. This case study of Moldova is based on primary and secondary data. Primary data consists of 150 interviews of random people from different regions of Moldova. Secondary data consists of reports and analyses provided by the UNODC, the IOM, LaStrada, and independent researchers. I used secondary data to understand how organizations and researchers explain human trafficking in Moldova. Then I used primary data to compare rural and urban populations regarding the aspects of human trafficking. Surprisingly, I found that rural residents of Moldova are more aware of human trafficking than urban residents ($P < .002$) – contrary to the information provided by The UNODC, the IOM, and LaStrada. These findings are extremely important because they show that approaches used by the UNODC, the IOM, and LaStrada may not be successful because they are based on inaccurate information. The success of fighting human trafficking is directly related to the way the UNODC, the IOM, and LaStrada perceive levels of awareness and understanding of human trafficking by rural and urban residents.

Keywords: Human Trafficking, Rural Residents, Urban Residents

1. Introduction:

Human trafficking is a growing problem that concerns an increasing number of people worldwide.⁵ It affects virtually all countries in the world, whether they are countries of origin, transit, or destination.⁶ Foreign scholars and international organizations focus on developing countries to address this problem. The location of Moldova in Central Europe and its high rate of poverty and corruption lead many to perceive Moldova as one of the main sources of human trafficking in the world.

Moldova has been placed on a third position with a high number of victims of human trafficking in Europe. The IOM assisted 98 victims from Moldova in 2011, preceded by Belarus with 142 victims, and Ukraine with 814 victims.⁷ The UNODC, the IOM, and LaStrada mention that most victims come from rural areas because rural people are less informed, less educated, and underestimate the risks of travelling abroad. Most prevention and assistance programs are drafted based on these perceptions.⁸ Major counter-trafficking organizations: analyze, draft, recommend, and implement programs based on information collected from assisted victims. However, only few or none have analyzed the effect of these programs and regulations on Moldovan populations. In this study I analyzed secondary and primary data to see how well the information provided by the UNODC, the IOM, and LaStrada reflects human trafficking at the moment.

2. Literature Review:

This section gives an overview of major counter-trafficking organizations in Moldova and shows its views about rural and urban populations regarding human trafficking. Keep in mind that their views and influence are directly related to their anti-trafficking efforts.

LaStrada is a European NGO aiming to prevent trafficking in human beings in Europe, in particular the trafficking of women, and to protect their rights.⁹ The UNODC is a global leader in the fight against illicit drugs and international crime. It tries to integrate a new gender perspective, implements projects for better livelihoods and against human trafficking.¹⁰ The “IOM is one of the main Europe-Wide actors in: developing counter-trafficking programs, consulting governments on anti-trafficking, conducting research on trafficking, and collaborations.”^{11,12}

The UNODC, the IOM, and LaStrada conclude that Moldova must take distinctive actions to raise awareness about this phenomenon and personal risks to Moldovans, especially to those from rural areas. The IOM and LaStrada explain that limited knowledge and access to the information lead to an increase of victims from rural areas:

- LaStrada: “victims from rural areas increased with 18% and victims from capital city Chisinau decreased by 13%, while in other cities decreased from 30% to 25%.”¹³
- The UN: “Rural areas lean themselves to being more favorable for recruitment of victims.”¹⁴
- LaStrada: “The majority of victims are coming from rural habitats (about 48%) followed by residents of small towns or suburbs (30%) and urban residents (22%).”¹⁵
- Tatiana Munteanu: “People from rural areas underestimate personal risks when they go abroad.”¹⁶
- LaStrada:

Unemployment and low awareness of residents of rural areas make them most vulnerable to the phenomenon of trafficking in human beings compared to urban residents. Recruiters also choose the rural area because rural inhabitants are less informed about the procedure of employment abroad and related risks. Analysis of administrative-territorial position of localities where victims of human trafficking lived at the moment of recruitment showed that in 2005-2010 victims of victims of trafficking lived almost in every region of the country.¹⁷

Varied reports on human trafficking repeat over and over that rural residents, especially rural women are most vulnerable to human trafficking. Most research projects are solely based on information collected from assisted victims of human trafficking. This raises the questions: how well does this information represent the population of Moldova? Is this information still relevant considering globalization and wider access to information? This case study analyzes and compares rural and urban populations of Moldova regarding human trafficking’s aspects.

3. Methodology:

This research project is based on three different data sources. The first data source involves personal interviews with Moldovan embassy members, Moldovan governmental institutions, NGOs, and international organizations. The second data source is based on secondary information: published reports, books, articles and research journals. Both data sources were used to see how the UNODC, the IOM, and LaStrada understand the problem of human trafficking, how they explain the high number of victims, and what methods they use to fight this problem.

The third data source consists of primary data collected during the summer of 2012. The sample contains 150 respondents who were identified through a random sample from different regions of Moldova. Interviews were based on a questionnaire, which contains seventeen questions; it tests populations` level of awareness and understanding of human trafficking, ability to seek help, media influence, perception of traveling abroad, ability to recognize potential trafficking situations, etc. The information has been collected on independent initiative by trained group of students under researcher`s supervision.

The approach used in this research is a case study method. Human trafficking is a problem that has different “faces” in different contexts. It is important to study each country individually because human trafficking issues are different in every country. This qualitative method of research offers more opportunities to study the level of

awareness and understanding of different aspects of human trafficking.¹⁸ The approach used in this study can be replicated in other countries facing this problem.

3.1 Data Limitations

This study has several limitations. Information contained in the primary dataset is nominal with exception of age of respondents. Nominal data does not allow more sophisticated statistical tests. The questionnaire does not include enough demographic questions that could contribute to more complicated statistical tests. Income would be a useful variable; however, Moldovan people are very skeptical when asked about social status and income: for this reason these questions were not included into questionnaire. Ethnicity variable was altered since most people of other nationalities still identified themselves as Moldovans. The respondents were picked randomly, however younger people were more likely to talk with our research team. This is not particularly a bad thing since younger people are trafficked more often. The interviews were conducted by different people. I tried to control this limitation by training the team responsible for data collection. Moreover, all information was audio recorded and allowed me to identify any potentially altered interviews. The IRB committee at St Norbert College reviewed questions used in this study.

4. Results and Discussion:

The tables and graphs in this document are based on primary dataset. I conducted statistical tests to analyze human trafficking's awareness and understanding levels among rural and urban populations. Then I compared the results of these tests with information provided by the major counter-trafficking organizations in Moldova. They say that rural residents, especially rural women are more vulnerable to human trafficking compared with urban residents (the UNODC reports, the IOM and LaStrada analyses, independent research projects, etc.). I hypothesized that globalization and wide access to information leveled out differences between rural and urban populations. However, I found that rural residents, especially rural women are more informed about the aspects of human trafficking than urban residents.

4.1 General overview of Moldovan population

Table 1: Moldovans` demographics and opinion about different aspects of human trafficking (n=150)

Variable	Label	Percentage
Age Group	Pupil 0-15	10%
	Student 16-24	43
	Young adult 25-39	22
	Adult 40-59	18
	Elderly 60-99	7
Residency	Rural area	56
	Urban area	44
Gender	Female	51
	Male	49
Informed about human traff.	Aware	97
Aware of hotline	Aware	75
Info. media rates	Often	68
Ability to look for help	High	60
Perceived danger abroad	Dangerous	67%

Table 1 shows the general characteristics of Moldovan population. I used randomization method to interview people: therefore the demographic information almost coincides with the information provided by the World Bank.^{19,20} Respondents from “student” and “young adult” age categories predominate because younger people

tended to share their views more often. This is an advantage since people from these age categories are trafficked more often.

The Moldovan populations are well informed about the aspects of human trafficking (97%).²¹ Most citizens have an accurate definition of human trafficking: they identify it as a process of transporting human beings for reasons of exploitation; most often they mentioned that trafficked people are being attracted through fraud or used without their consent. They acknowledged that people of both genders and all ages can be trafficked, but women and children are trafficked more often than men. When asked the follow up question: “why do you think that women are trafficked more than men?” most popular answer was that this is what they hear from mass-media. The mass-media plays a great role in shaping public’s perceptions about human trafficking. People directly correlate the trafficking rates with media rates. When human trafficking stories and facts are aired more often on mass-media: this is when people think that more people are trafficked.

The most popular sources of help are police and hotline, followed by organizations fighting human trafficking, embassies, and family members. The question “Who can help you in a trafficking situation?” was re-framed into “Where can victims of human trafficking look for help?” for those who did not want to imagine being in a trafficking situation. Police was referred as a source of information and an intermediate actor who can re-direct victims to further instances. Moldovan populations feel that police is not able to solve their problems.

The opinion poll shows that 67% of population said that the safety of traveling abroad depends: of the country of destination, legal status, means of transportation, level of familiarity with the country, level of language skills, age, sex, and other factors. When asked a follow up question “To what countries is most dangerous to travel?”, respondents mentioned Turkey, Arab Emirates, Egypt, Iran, etc. People consider Scandinavian, Baltic, and the EU countries to be most secure countries. They consider the lack of familiarity to the country and the language to make people most vulnerable to human trafficking. Almost all respondents said that traveling uninformed with strangers can surely lead to human trafficking.

4.2 Differences between Rural and Urban Residents

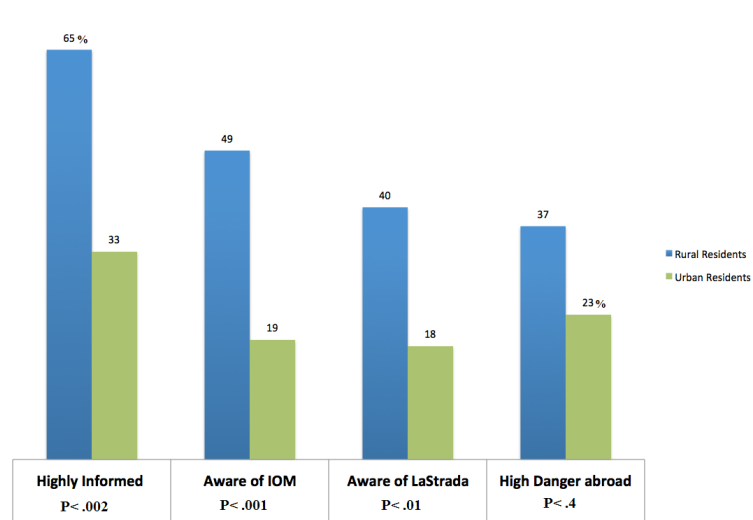


Figure 1: The effects of residency areas on Moldovans` opinion about different aspects of human trafficking (n=150)

Many explain high number of rural victims as a result of lack of information about human trafficking`s aspects:

- The UNODC: “Moldova should take more actions in raising awareness about human trafficking in rural areas.”^{22,23}
- The United Nations: “rural areas are more favorable environments for the recruitment of victims.”²⁴
- Nicolaie Misail: “The majority of victims come from rural habitats as a result of lack of information.”²⁵
- Tatiana Munteanu: “People from rural regions of Moldova have very little access to information, many of them have never heard of human trafficking.”²⁶

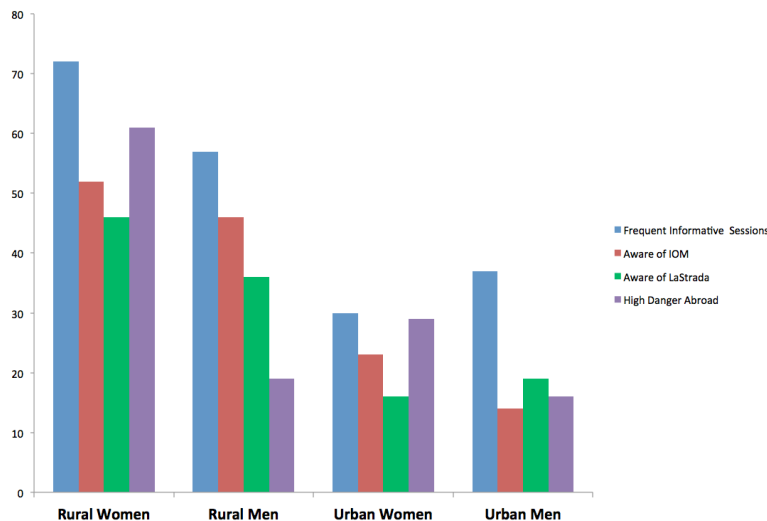
However, I found that rural residents are more informed about the aspects of human trafficking than urban residents. Figure 1 shows that rural residents are more informed about: human trafficking, the IOM and LaStrada's activities. Rural residents understand better the risks of traveling abroad compared to urban residents. Category "highly informed" represents people who actively learn and discuss information about human trafficking. People from this category said that they hear, watch, read, and discuss information related to human trafficking every other day. The urban populations are exposed to the same amount of information, but they pay less attention. Rural residents are more social in this respect – they often discuss news with people from their community – in this way information spreads to the rest of suburban or urban areas. Rural residents share information related to human trafficking along with their own experiences or real-life stories, which makes information more credible and appealing to others.

4.3 The Myth about Rural Women from Moldova

Moldovan women from rural areas are considered to be the most vulnerable to human trafficking:

- The UN CEDAW recommends that Moldova work towards eliminating rural women's vulnerability to traffickers, and to put in place services for the rehabilitation and reintegration of trafficking victims. ²⁷
- The UN: "The Committee is concerned particularly about vulnerable groups of women such as rural women." ²⁸
- LaStrada: "Moldovan women from rural habitats form the largest group of trafficked people." ²⁹
- Tatiana Munteanu: "Women from rural regions are most vulnerable to trafficking because they are poorly informed." ³⁰

Despite these claims, I found that rural women are most informed about the aspects of human trafficking when controlling for gender.



Statistical Significance: Frequent informative session ($P < .002$ females(f) & $P < .291$ for males(m)); Aware of IOM ($P < .033$ (f) & $P < .015$ (m)); Aware of LaStrada ($P < .042$ (f) & $P < .17$ (m)); high danger abroad ($P < .049$ (f) & $P < .49$ (m)).

Figure 2: The effects of residency areas on Moldovans' opinion about different aspects of human trafficking, controlling for gender (n=150)

I found that rural residents are more informed about human trafficking's aspects: this information is contrary to the UNODC, the IOM, LaStrada, and some independent researchers' claims. Why my findings are so different than information provided by major counter-trafficking organizations? It is well known that data collection is a cumbersome process that takes a lot of money and time. These organizations have limited resources and try to use them for awareness and assistance programs. They consider information collected from victims enough to be used in drafting analyses, recommendations, and regulations. ^{31,32} Information is collected mainly from victims and those

who are involved in the process (police, border officers, victims` family, etc.). Information is processed and kept confidential by each organization. However, the IOM and LaStrada share some information regarding identified victims.³³ Analyzed information is used to draft recommendations, programs, and regulations. More importantly, the analyzed information is used to describe general Moldovan populations` characteristics. Based on this information, they can rightfully say that rural residents are more vulnerable to human trafficking because they lack information, understanding, and education and so on. Their claims seem to be backed by high number of victims. But how accurate is this information? Can we draw generalizations about Moldovan populations based solely on victim-oriented information?

This study sheds light on area that only few researchers have stepped on. Most researchers study this problem based on victim-oriented information. Rebecca Surtees is one of the few researchers who had the courage to point out the weaknesses and limitations of information collected from identified victims of human trafficking.³⁴ Information collected from assisted and identified victims is biased and represents only a specific category of people. This information does not represent all types of trafficked victims.³⁵ More than that, this information should not be used as an indicator of Moldovan general populations. This study indicates that even information provided by major counter-trafficking organizations can be inaccurate and outdated. I found that rural residents, especially rural women are more informed about human trafficking`s aspects than urban residents.

5. Conclusion:

I hypothesized that the differences between rural and urban residents` awareness and understanding levels are insignificant thanks to wider access to information. However, I found that rural residents are more informed about human trafficking than urban residents. These findings are surprising and novice in human trafficking domain. Human trafficking became an attractive area of research in 1990`s. The UNODC, the IOM, LaStrada, and independent researchers have studied this problem based on victim-oriented information. Information collected from assisted and identified victims is biased and non-representative of unidentified victims. Moreover, this information shall not be used to draw conclusions about general populations of Moldova. The UNODC, the IOM, LaStrada, and others` claims – that rural victims are more trafficked because they lack awareness and understanding about human trafficking`s aspects – are based on inaccurate information. Why should we care? We should care because these views shape anti-trafficking efforts of major national and international organizations such as the UNODC, the IOM, and LaStrada. These findings are of major importance because it hints that most organizations use inaccurate information, which can slow the process of combating human trafficking. Human trafficking is a growing problem that affects all countries in the world: it is essential that organizations fighting this problem use accurate and up-to-date information. Traffickers take advantage of globalization and innovation and come up with newer ways of trafficking people. The recommendations to anti-trafficking organizations are: to update their database more often, to use more methods of data collection, to acknowledge the limitations of victim-oriented data. Independent research based on primary data will bring new information on the table. It will be useful to replicate these methods in other countries.

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