

Sex trafficking and sexual exploitation are collateral damage of Mexico's neoliberal fantasy



An epidemic of sexual trafficking and exploitation of women and children has turned Mexico into the "Latin American Thailand". Incoming president Andrés Manuel López Obrador promises to tackle the corruption and impunity enabling these practices, but there is less recognition of their links to a neoliberal fantasy that was once presented as lifeline for poor communities, writes [María Encarnación López](#) (London Metropolitan University).

After the illicit trade in drugs and weapons, sex trafficking is the [third most profitable industry in the world](#). After drug trafficking, it is also the second most lucrative industry in Mexico, which has become the highest-ranked country in the Americas in terms of [female trafficking for sexual exploitation](#), as well as the world's main propagator of child pornography online.



In recent years, Mexico has become a hub for sex trafficking and child pornography (detail of [Ira Gelb, CC BY-ND 2.0](#))

Paedophiles of all nationalities travel to major tourist cities, drawn by a vast array of websites distributing pictures and videos of sexually exploited Mexican children. The extent of this business, endorsed by cartels and corrupt institutions, has seen Mexico dubbed the "Latin American Thailand".

While the security agenda of President-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) does [target the institutional corruption](#) and impunity that enable crime in Mexico, there is little recognition that poverty and structural violence continue to push thousands of defenceless women and children into the global business of human trafficking for sexual exploitation.

Sex trafficking: collateral damage of a neoliberal fantasy

The idea of neoliberalism as a source of human wellbeing collapses in places where inequality is widening severely in the economic and social spheres alike. Thousands of Mexicans have also been forced to migrate north following the false dawn of the neoliberal economic model that was "locked in" by the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994. The young women often [trafficked into the US](#) through false job offers tend to come from those groups that lost the most in this model.

Meanwhile, advances in communications like the internet and webcams, which were initially [presented as a lifeline](#), have instead become a tool for facilitating access to young women and children worldwide. The marketisation of sex has also enabled creation of an online sexual supermarket, with customers all over the world offered an array of stereotypically sexualised women: passive Japanese geishas, uninhibited Colombians, nymphomaniac Cubans, deviant Russian ice queens, affectionate Dominicans, and so on.

But the flipside of this fantasy is brutal abuse and terror. While myths persist about women “wanting to be there”, “doing it for the money”, or “looking for husbands amongst their clients”, in reality forced subordination to generally masculine control tends to produce severe problems of shame, anxiety, eating disorders, depression, and sexual dysfunction. So pernicious is this phenomenon that even after being rescued many victims continue to place the view of their clients and “owners” above their own feelings and health. In order to assimilate back into everyday society, they need first to “de-eroticise” their behaviour.

It is the client's indifference to the situation of prostituted individuals that normalises the sexual objectification of vulnerable women and children: these consumers are the hidden driving force behind the recent explosion of the global sex trade.


Mexico: the Latin American Thailand

Mexico is going through [the most violent era of its modern history](#), with the highest homicide rate ever in 2017 (over 31,000) and 2018 likely to be worse. The same criminal organisations involved in much of this violence also capture around [21,000 minors per year](#) for sexual exploitation, with 45 per cent being indigenous girls.

That said, Mexico is also a receiving country when it comes to prostitution. Foreign victims are primarily [citizens of Central and South American countries](#) that are lured or abducted into the industry. Women [from Eastern Europe](#) are also contacted over the internet and effectively imported with promises of a better life.

Prostitution is not legal or illegal in Mexico: it is tolerated. This lack of legal restrictions on brothels and pimps have allowed Mexico to become the second most popular destination in the world for child sex tourism (after Thailand). There are more than [12,300 Mexican accounts online](#) being used for the distribution of pictures and videos of sexually exploited children. Clients from all over the world [travel to](#) resort cities like Puerto Vallarta, Cancún, or Acapulco to satisfy their sexual fantasies with young women and minors.

Despite important investigations into political involvement in child sexual exploitation, such as [The Demons of Eden](#) (2007, below, in Spanish), many cases are buried using legal manoeuvres whose success depends largely on the social position of those involved.



[Evidence from escapees](#) indicates that the crisis of Mexico's "disappeared" – tens of thousands of people have vanished since 2006 – involves camps in which forced prostitution is endorsed by [organised crime](#) groups. Social activists report that these organisations are further supported in the production of false passports and other illicit operations by migration agents, police officers, businesspeople, politicians, bankers, and pimps, the vast majority of whom are men. In return, cartels pave the streets, erect churches, and contribute to education centres, effectively turning Mexico's neoliberal fantasy to their own advantage.

In the city of Tenancingo, often presented as the [sex-trafficking capital of the world](#), local men (known as *padrotes*) dupe poor, uneducated, and indigenous girls into "love relationships" with promises of a prosperous future, only then to [trap them in forced prostitution](#). They also control certain geographical areas, selecting attractive victims, monitoring their routines, and ultimately kidnapping them (*levantón*). Sometimes they don't even bother to do prior surveillance: they just see a girl they like, stop the car, and take her away.

Towards a new state security agenda in AMLO's Mexico

If it is to have any impact on this problem, AMLO's [new state security agenda](#) must run in parallel with significant reform of the justice system's approach to sexual trafficking and exploitation. This should place greater emphasis on investigating:

1. the fate of young local women who are disappeared
2. the routes and modus operandi of international sex-trafficking groups
3. the identities of "unknown" foreign females working in clubs and table-dancing venues around the country
4. the rise of foreign involvement in buying Mexican women and children for sex.

The incoming president's campaign slogan "[for the benefit of all, starting with the poor](#)" implies a commitment to the young and generally impoverished victims of sexual trafficking and exploitation, and this could be complemented by the work of civil society organisations like [Mexico United Against Delinquency](#), which assists victims by building a bridge to state institutions.

However, state involvement in such lucrative illicit activities and a tolerant stance towards (forced) prostitution will make the trafficking and sexual exploitation of young women and children very difficult to eradicate. Without a serious, sustained, and comprehensive attempt to tackle the problem at its roots, Mexico will continue to hold the ignominious title of the "Latin American Thailand" for the foreseeable future.

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