

A Phenomenon Displaced: Human trafficking in the Philippines in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan

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Abstract

Widespread claims about human trafficking emerge after many climate-induced disasters, with news headlines about children being snatched, abducted, and exploited. One such example is Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) which struck the Philippines in 2013, partially destroying Tacloban City and claiming more than 6,000 lives. Returning to the city after this historic storm, I conducted interviews with professionals who were likely to have encountered trafficking cases, including police, government anti-trafficking officials, NGO workers, community leaders, academics, and judges. However, despite widespread claims of post-disaster trafficking, only four cases were ever investigated—none of which resulted in prosecution. Casting the net wider, I discovered that affected people living in more peripheral areas, or who were displaced there, appeared more likely to be recruited into trafficking than those at the geographical centre of the disaster. In an area of study almost completely devoid of empirical evidence, this paper challenges an assumed direct link between disasters and trafficking. It presents a more nuanced picture of a multi-step process in which disasters destroy livelihoods, prompting a precarious search for work which can, in turn, heighten the risk of human trafficking.

Keywords: human trafficking, disaster, Typhoon Haiyan, Super Typhoon Yolanda, Philippines

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Introduction

Typhoon Haiyan (known in the Philippines as Super Typhoon Yolanda) made landfall on the morning of 8 November 2013, claiming at least 6,300 lives,¹ displacing more than 4 million people, and affecting up to 16 million overall.² Tacloban City, with a population of around 220,000 at the time, bore the brunt of this destruction as a huge storm surge crashed into the coastline with the deadly effect of a tsunami.³ The Philippines is no stranger to extreme weather events, experiencing an average of 20 typhoons each year,⁴ and being situated on the ‘Pacific Ring of Fire’ with a heightened risk of volcano eruptions and earthquakes. While there are around 200 fatalities annually from disasters in the country, the death toll from Haiyan—a disaster which was ‘very unlikely to have occurred without climate change’⁵—was unprecedented, with some local organisations suggesting the real number of lives claimed was closer to 18,000.⁶

Fears that individuals, particularly children, were at risk of human trafficking surfaced in the media and on NGO websites within days.⁷ Speculation around these trafficking destinations varied, with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) stating that the region was already known as a ‘source of women and children for sexual exploitation, and men and boys for labour exploitation’.⁸ Yet, as with myriad similar claims following other climate-induced disasters (see

¹ *Final Report Re: Effects of Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan)*, National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC), November 2013, https://ndrrmc.gov.ph/attachments/article/1329/FINAL_REPORT_re_Effects_of_Typhoon_YOLANDA_HAIYAN_06-09NOV2013.pdf.

² M Yonetani *et al.*, *The Evolving Picture of Displacement in the Wake of Typhoon Haiyan: An Evidence-based Overview*, Government of the Philippines, Department of Social Welfare and Development *et al.*, 2014, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/the-evolving-picture-of-displacement-in-the-wake-of-typhoon-haiyan-an-evidence-based>.

³ NDRRMC.

⁴ ‘Information on Disaster Risk Reduction of the Member Countries: The Philippines’, Asian Disaster Risk Reduction Center, 2018, <https://www.adrc.asia/nationinformation.php?NationCode=608&Lang=en>.

⁵ N Sparks and R Toumi, ‘Climate Change Attribution of Typhoon Haiyan With the Imperial College Storm Model’, *Atmospheric Science Letters*, vol. 26, issue 1, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1002/asl.1285>.

⁶ *Disaster upon Disaster: Lessons beyond Yolanda*, IBON Foundation, 2015, https://www.medico.de/fileadmin/user_upload/media/en/Disaster_Upon_Disaster_Final.pdf.

⁷ T Branigan, ‘Typhoon Haiyan: Children in Disaster Zone Are Vulnerable, Warns Unicef’, *The Guardian*, 20 November 2013.

⁸ ‘Fears Grow of Increase in People Trafficking in Typhoon-Affected Philippines’, International Organization for Migration (IOM), 14 January 2014.

the next section), no specific cases were mentioned and no evidence was presented to back up these assertions.

Attempting to address this void of evidence, I returned to Tacloban City three years after this historic storm to interview key stakeholders involved in the disaster relief effort who were likely to have encountered cases of human trafficking in this ‘central disaster zone’. I then extended the geographical reach of my investigation to the ‘outer disaster zone’ of Cebu and the capital Manila to learn what was known about post-Haiyan trafficking in these peripheral areas.

This paper aims to challenge the assumption that trafficking risks are heightened in the immediate aftermath of a disaster in the worst affected area. Through the case study of Typhoon Haiyan, I present a more nuanced picture of trafficking risks based on the sequence of disaster leading to economic desperation and loss of livelihoods, which, if no assistance is given, can lead to a desperate employment search and morph into human trafficking. Furthermore, this study is not limited to a particular type of trafficking and could involve any type of exploitation and any means of recruitment. It is specifically focused on the vulnerabilities that led up to the act of trafficking itself.

Literature Review: The disaster-trafficking discourse

Warnings about the risk of human trafficking are frequently issued after major disasters, with news headlines that children are being ‘snatched by mafias’,⁹ criminal gangs are ‘offering [children] for adoption or exploitation’,¹⁰ and children and human organs are trafficked¹¹ by ‘those who seek to profit from their misery’.¹² This common refrain first began to surface after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami,¹³ followed by the 2005 Pakistan earthquake,¹⁴ the 2008 Myanmar

⁹ L A Santos, ‘Human Trafficking Prevalent in Post-typhoon Philippines’, *Devex*, 2 January 2014.

¹⁰ J Aglionby, J Steele, and B Whitaker, ‘Criminals May Be Trafficking Orphans’, *The Guardian*, 5 January 2005.

¹¹ N.a., ‘Haitian PM: Human Organs Are Being Trafficked In Aftermath of Quake’, *Huffpost*, 30 March 2010.

¹² US Department of State, ‘South Asia: U.S. “horrified” at Child Trafficking in Tsunami Aftermath’, *ReliefWeb*, 5 January 2005.

¹³ G Nishiyama, ‘Indonesia: UNICEF Confirms Tsunami Child Trafficking Case’, *ReliefWeb*, 7 January 2005.

¹⁴ D Walsh, ‘Earthquake Orphans under Guard to Stop Child Trafficking’, *The Guardian*, 19 October 2005.

cyclone,¹⁵ the Haiti earthquake of 2010,¹⁶ and Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 which is the focus of this study. Many such disaster-trafficking warnings have been issued since then, including after the Nepal earthquake of 2015,¹⁷ making this an ‘integral part of the disaster narrative’.¹⁸

Behind these headlines, the disaster-trafficking connection is explored theoretically in the literature, with scholars noting that trafficking is more likely to happen during economic crises, disasters, and conflicts¹⁹ when the ‘supply of available children increases, the demand for those children increases, and the intentions of those transporting the children is difficult, if not impossible, to assess’.²⁰ Displacement from disaster zones has been raised as a trafficking risk factor,²¹ with those on the move facing potential exploitation.²² People actively seeking out smugglers to move out of a disaster area can also be at risk because smuggling can morph into trafficking.²³ It is claimed that, following disasters, a breakdown of law and order exacerbates these risks,²⁴ coupled with a sudden demand for cheap labour.²⁵ The ability of law enforcement and state capacity to prevent post-disaster trafficking may also be a factor, with inadequate laws meaning that

¹⁵ N.a., ‘Child Traffickers Preying on Burma Victims: Aid Groups’, *ABC*, 14 May 2008.

¹⁶ J G Delva, ‘Americans Arrested Taking Children out of Haiti’, *Renters*, 31 January 2010; L Cohen, ‘How Traffickers Exploit Children in Haiti’s Orphanages’, *CNN*, 2 March 2018.

¹⁷ J Burke, ‘Indian Gangs Found Trafficking Women From Earthquake-hit Nepal’, *The Guardian*, 30 July 2015.

¹⁸ H Montgomery, ‘Rumours of Child Trafficking after Natural Disasters: Fact, Fiction or Fantasy?’, *Journal of Children and Media*, vol. 5, issue 4, 2011, pp. 395–410, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2011.587142>.

¹⁹ L Shelley, *Human Trafficking: A Global Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2010, p. 94.

²⁰ I Atzet, ‘Post-Crisis Actions to Avoid International Child Trafficking’, *Journal of Law & Family Studies*, vol. 12, issue 2, 2010, pp. 499–510, p. 510.

²¹ J N Sigmon, ‘Combating Modern-Day Slavery: Issues in Identifying and Assisting Victims of Human Trafficking Worldwide’, *Victims and Offenders*, vol. 3, issue 2–3, 2008, pp. 245–257, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564880801938508>.

²² S Coelho *et al.*, *The Climate Change – Human Trafficking Nexus*, IOM, 2016.

²³ Y Tamura, *Illegal Migration, People Smuggling, and Migrant Exploitation*, INSIDE Paper No. 25, Australian National University, 2011; K Fitzgibbon, ‘Modern-day Slavery? The Scope of Trafficking in Persons in Africa’, *African Security Studies*, vol. 12, issue 1, 2010, pp. 81–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2003.9627573>.

²⁴ A Childs, ‘Why Child Trafficking Spikes after Natural Disasters – And What We Can Do about It’, *The Conversation*, 22 March 2016.

²⁵ S Hepburn and R J Simon, *Human Trafficking around the World: Hidden in Plain Sight*, Columbia University Press, 2013, p. 3.

trafficking cases cannot always be pursued.²⁶

Academics reviewing the slim but growing literature on the disaster-trafficking nexus have raised concerns about a lack of solid evidence. A recent literature review found just a handful of peer-reviewed articles on the topic, none of which contained any empirical research,²⁷ coupled with more general concerns that ‘the current discourse on human trafficking is driven by mythology’.²⁸ There are also calls for more country-specific studies, rather than large sweeps of multi-country secondary data.²⁹ It should be noted that it is difficult to produce reliable data on human trafficking as many survivors do not report the crime because of stigma³⁰ and even experts do not always agree on what should be counted as trafficking.³¹ Furthermore, disaster-trafficking beliefs presented in Western media may not be held by local experts in the areas affected.³²

Methodology

For the first part of this study, I interviewed representatives of authorities and NGOs as well as academics in Tacloban City, the area most severely affected by Haiyan, who were likely to have information about trafficking cases. I gathered testimony from four politicians, eight civil servants, two prosecutors, two NGO workers, and one senior academic between 5 and 16 June 2017. These included the Prosecutor for Region VIII, who is Chair of the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT); Tacloban City’s Chief Prosecutor; and officials from the

²⁶ N F Bromfield and K S Rotabi, ‘Human Trafficking and the Haitian Child Abduction Attempt: Policy Analysis and Implications for Social Workers and NASW’, *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–25.

²⁷ V Curbelo, ‘Exploring the Relationship between Humanitarian Emergencies and Human Trafficking: A Narrative Review’, *Journal of Modern Slavery*, vol. 6, issue 3, 2021, pp. 7–18, <https://doi.org/10.22150/jms/XIPN5627>.

²⁸ S X Zhang, ‘Beyond the “Natasha” Story – A Review and Critique of Current Research on Sex Trafficking’, *Global Crime*, vol. 10, issue 3, 2009, pp. 178–195, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17440570903079899>.

²⁹ K Hoogesteyn *et al.*, ‘The Intersection of Human Trafficking and Natural Disasters: A Scoping Review’, *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, vol. 25, issue 4, 2024, pp. 2877–2890, <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380241227985>.

³⁰ E Nykaza, ‘Human Trafficking and Its Public Health Implications’, in P A Gaist (ed.), *Igniting the Power of Community – The Role of CBOs and NGOs in Global Public Health*, Springer, New York, 2009, pp. 311–325, p. 319.

³¹ J Tigno, ‘Agency by Proxy’, in M Ford, L Lyons, and W van Schendel (eds.), *Labour, Migration and Human Trafficking*, Taylor and Francis, London, 2012, pp. 23–40.

³² Montgomery, p. 405; E M Goździak and A Walter, ‘Misconceptions about Human Trafficking in a Time of Crisis’, *Forced Migration Review*, vol. 45, 2014, pp. 58–59, p. 59.

Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Tacloban City Police, the Women and Children's Shelter of Tacloban City, the Tacloban Statistics Office, and the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), Region VIII, which is responsible for preventing trafficking of Philippine people abroad, and a professor from the University of the Philippines Tacloban College. I also interviewed the Mayor of nearby Palo, adjoining Tacloban, which was severely affected by Typhoon Haiyan, a number of *barangay* (the smallest administrative units in the Philippines) captains, as well as NGO workers and academics in the city. All of these respondents participated in semi-structured interviews to share their knowledge of trafficking cases following the typhoon, the details of which is presented shortly.

I conducted subsequent semi-structured interviews in the wider affected areas of Cebu Island and in the capital Manila, where thousands of evacuees arrived. Interviewees in this geographic area included two social workers responsible for anti-trafficking; the manager of a trafficking shelter with two sites in Cebu City and a third site in a more rural area of Cebu Island; three NGO workers; four academics; and Cebu City's Chief Prosecutor, who also served as the regional anti-trafficking coordinator.

When this research took place, three years after Haiyan, just one specific case of post-disaster trafficking had been reported in the public domain—a news report about attempts to traffic a 16-year-old girl on an evacuation flight,³³ which later turned out to be false. I was also aware of two official reports published after Haiyan stating that 'at least two trafficking investigations' had been launched, but no further details were provided.³⁴

I therefore began every interview with a general question about whether respondents were familiar with claims of post-disaster trafficking, and if they agreed in principle that this disaster-trafficking link existed. I then asked them to recount *any* specific cases they knew about following Typhoon Haiyan. Their responses prompted numerous follow-up questions about the details of these trafficking cases, what measures were taken to prevent human trafficking, and cross-referencing interviewees' accounts, because the same trafficking investigation was often referred to by multiple respondents. This interview process was the same in the inner and outer disaster zones.

I carried out the research project across three visits in June and November 2017, as well as July 2018. All interviews were conducted in English which is spoken

³³ A Tang, 'Authorities Detain Two Men Suspected of Trafficking 16-Year-Old Girl in Typhoon-Hit Philippines', *Thomson Reuters Foundation News*, 28 November 2013.

³⁴ Walk Free Foundation, *Global Slavery Index 2014*, Hope for Children Organization Australia, 2014.

fluently across the Philippines. As a visitor who does not speak Waray-Waray, the local language in Tacloban, conducting the interviews in English means I may have missed some subtleties with the absence of vernacular descriptions, as have been documented by local researchers.³⁵ Furthermore, as a foreign researcher, I cannot claim to have any deep-rooted societal or contextual knowledge, which should be borne in mind throughout this paper.³⁶ Indeed, having been deployed to the Philippines in the immediate aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan with an NGO, and having heard many rumours of trafficking while based there, my positionality must be considered throughout this paper—recognising that a researcher’s position has influence on every aspect of their work, including why they choose a particular topic, how the research is conducted, and how the results are portrayed.³⁷

My experience in the wake of this disaster certainly sparked my initial interest in this topic. There were widespread claims of post-disaster trafficking while I was based in the disaster zone, but it was not clear which areas or communities were affected. With an aid worker background, my aim entering this research was simply to gather evidence. Furthermore, even though I always explained to interviewees that my research would be used for a PhD dissertation, their knowledge of my aid worker background could have affected my access to them or shaped the discussion. It is difficult to know with certainty, but it appeared that post-disaster trafficking was a ‘neutral’ topic for the professionals I interviewed, and they spoke freely and thoughtfully during the interviews.

I took hand-written notes during all interviews. All but two respondents agreed that I could also make audio recordings of the interviews on my mobile phone; two judges preferred for me to take written notes only. Audio recordings were securely stored on a password-protected drive. A two-stage ethics review was conducted at SOAS, University of London, before this research project began.

³⁵ A J Pacoma, Y Su, and A Genotiva, ‘Resilience Unfiltered: Local Understandings of Resilience after Typhoon Haiyan in Tacloban City, Philippines’, *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs*, vol. 4, issue 1, 2022, pp. 14–24, <https://doi.org/10.7227/JHA.078>.

³⁶ J Spiers, ‘New Perspectives on Vulnerability Using Emic and Etic Approaches’, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, vol. 31, issue 3, 2000, pp. 715–721, p. 720, <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2000.01328.x>.

³⁷ C Wilson, G Janes, and J Williams, ‘Identity, Positionality and Reflexivity: Relevance and Application to Research Paramedics’, *British Paramedic Journal*, vol. 7, issue 2, 2022, pp. 43–49, <https://doi.org/10.29045/14784726.2022.09.7.2.43>.

Findings

Trafficking from the 'Central Disaster Zone'

Before the typhoon struck it was estimated that 40% of children in the affected areas were living in poverty with 'trafficking and other forms of gender-based violence among the most acute risks for women and children'.³⁸ It is clear, therefore, that human trafficking was already widely recognised as a significant risk. It has been noted that local experts are more likely to be sceptical about disaster-trafficking than Western observers.³⁹ However, nearly all officials I interviewed from frontline organisations and agencies in Tacloban City stated unequivocally that they believed post-disaster trafficking was a major concern, particularly after Haiyan. It is unclear exactly why they believed this, but one possibility is that the Philippines is an English-speaking country consuming international media which runs such stories. Examples of responses confirming this belief include a social welfare officer who told me: 'If you are a victim of disaster, there's no hope, there's no future, and somebody offers you something which you believe initially is through good will. You can easily fall prey to trafficking.' The head of an anti-trafficking charity said: 'The traffickers are actually faster than other disaster efforts that we have. Every time there's a rise in vulnerability, especially in terms of disaster, there's a rise in cases of human trafficking. Because traffickers capitalise on desperation; they capitalise on the vulnerability of the people.' A social worker added that 'families can be disintegrated [following disaster] which really affects vulnerability, including vulnerability to human trafficking'.

Most of my interviewees spoke about their strong belief in trafficking related to Typhoon Haiyan in general terms but, when I probed further, were unable to provide specific examples. Ultimately, piecing together all the information from my interviewees, it became clear that just four Haiyan-related trafficking cases were ever recorded in Tacloban City. One was discounted, and none resulted in prosecutions.

Case 1 – Discounted: The first report of a suspected trafficking case (referenced above), one week after the typhoon, was dropped by the authorities as they concluded it was based on a misunderstanding. A 16-year-old girl had asked an engineer in his 20s to enlist her as a family member so she could be allowed to board an evacuation flight from Tacloban City Airport, as unaccompanied minors were not allowed to leave. The news report, which was based on preliminary information at the time, referred to two men being involved in this case—though my interviewee referred to just one individual. The fact that he was unrelated

³⁸ UNICEF, *Four Months After Typhoon Haiyan, Philippines: Progress Report*, UNICEF, 2014, p. 12.

³⁹ Montgomery.

to the girl was detected at a ‘migration outflow desk’ at the airport, resulting in him being questioned by police. The Head of Women and Children Protection at Tacloban City Police told me: ‘[The case was] filed at the Prosecutor’s Office, but the subject was freed because he was only lending a helping hand to the girl.’

Case 2 – ‘Fake nuns’ arrested: In May 2014, six months after the typhoon, a group of women dressed as nuns were arrested by Tacloban City Police at Abucay Bus Station after reports from a member of the public. The ‘nuns’ were with five girls from Samar Island who had been promised school places in Manila. Recalling the case, a senior official from Tacloban City Police told me that the women could not produce satisfactory documentation and were arrested pending further investigation. A social worker involved in the case told me: ‘The children were brought here, as this is the temporary shelter for them. And they [the nuns] said they were like an NGO. But, when we went into the details, they were not registered as an NGO. We filed a case, and they were put in jail for five to six months. However, because of some interventions of people who are influential, the case was subsequently dropped at the prosecutor level.’ While the authorities intervened before any potential exploitation had taken place, they investigated this as trafficking because the group of women were not who they claimed to be, raising suspicions over their motive which the authorities believed required further investigation.

Case 3 – Sex work: Seven months after the typhoon, a group of women and girls—siblings from Tacloban City—travelled to Abuyog on Leyte Island, on the coast south of Tacloban, to look for a job and were reportedly forced into sex work at a karaoke bar. This incident was linked to ‘poverty and desperation after Typhoon Haiyan’, according to a representative of the Women and Children’s Shelter of Tacloban City. There is no record of a prosecution, and none of the officials interviewed knew how it concluded. Some scepticism is needed around this case as the circumstances were conveyed by one institution in somewhat general terms. While they would have no reason to fabricate the story, I was unable to have this account corroborated by a second source or any documentation.

Case 4 – Wages withheld: In this case, five boys under 18 secured a job in a warehouse but were not paid the city’s minimum wage. The Head of the Women and Children’s Shelter of Tacloban City told me: ‘They landed a job in one of the warehouses to carry the goods from the truck to the warehouse and vice versa. They complained that they cannot bear any more of this kind of job because they are still minors. They were not paid fairly, according to the daily wage in Tacloban City. We rescued them from that warehouse, and the owner—through their lawyer—gave them their salaries.’ The DSWD said that this case was connected to poverty following Typhoon Haiyan. While the details were conveyed with first-hand knowledge, a question again emerges over whether it meets the definition of human trafficking. The children were certainly recruited into this work, but, at their destination, was this ‘forced labour’ and did the employers have control

over them, as set out in the trafficking definition? The fact that they were paid very little and were ‘rescued’ by the social welfare department, rather than leaving freely, suggests this may be the case.

Trafficking from the ‘Outer Disaster Zone’

Having established only four legally investigated trafficking cases in the central disaster zone of Tacloban City, my research expanded to the wider disaster zone to glean facts about known trafficking cases in two specific areas: first, the major cities of Cebu and Manila, where evacuees from Tacloban were taken; and, second, outlying rural areas on Cebu Island. Interviews in this wider area were conducted with two social workers from the DSWD responsible for anti-trafficking—the first in Cebu City, and the second at Lapu-Lapu City near Mactan–Cebu Airport; the manager of a trafficking shelter with two sites in Cebu City and a third site in a rural area of Cebu Island; three NGO workers; four academics; and Cebu City’s Chief Prosecutor, who also served as the regional anti-trafficking coordinator. Unlike my interviews in the central disaster zone of Tacloban, this cannot claim to be an exhaustive list of officials dealing with trafficking cases because of the huge size of the cities and a much larger geographic area.

At least 17,000 people evacuated Tacloban after Haiyan on military flights,⁴⁰ with many more evacuating on ferries. Temporary shelter, food, and psychosocial and medical assistance were provided at Villamor Airbase in Manila, along with centres in Cebu City, to support those crossing by ferry from Ormoc, on the western side of Leyte Island. Around 5,000 people each day were taking this route, with most ending up in ‘dispersed placement settings’ outside evacuation centres.⁴¹ As I observed on previous visits while working for an international NGO, the reality was that many of these were sprawling ‘tent cities’. The wider area of Cebu was affected by the typhoon with 110,000 damaged homes⁴² and 74 deaths recorded.

So what trafficking risks did evacuees and migrants face in the cities? A typical scenario described to me, echoed in the literature, is that those who migrate to cities without savings, education, or advanced skills ‘can become easy targets for exploitation’.⁴³ This creates a perfect storm of risk factors, primarily economic desperation. In the case of Haiyan, the IOM reported that almost half of those evacuating had no means of financial support.⁴⁴ Furthermore, with many

⁴⁰ A Sherwood *et al.*, *Resolving Post-disaster Displacement: Insights from the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda)*, Brookings Institution/IOM, 2015, p. 21.

⁴¹ Yonetani.

⁴² NDRRMC, p. 4.

⁴³ Coelho *et al.*, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Sherwood *et al.*

essential documents washed away or destroyed during Haiyan,⁴⁵ a number of my interviewees stated that a lack of identity documents led individuals to seek risky informal ‘off-the-books’ employment. In all, information from my interviews in the outer disaster zone confirmed seven trafficking cases involving 25 people.

Case 1 – Eight children in a Manila factory: An anti-trafficking NGO in Manila told me it supported eight children who had come to Villamore Airbase on an evacuation flight. They were recruited to work in a factory but were not paid and their freedoms were curtailed—thus meeting the definition of human trafficking under Philippine law.

Case 2 – Children forced into labour: The same NGO dealt with a second post-Haiyan trafficking incident involving children from Bantayan Island, north of Cebu Island, which was badly hit by the typhoon. This was a case of forced labour involving a group of four boys and two girls who had arrived at the North Harbor in Manila. Details of the case were scant but were said to have involved leaving an area devastated by Typhoon Haiyan and a situation of economic desperation. Once again, a question arises about the circumstances of this case and whether it crossed the line from child labour to human trafficking for forced labour.

Case 3 – Child domestic work: Another NGO related to me a case of a 17-year-old girl from Leyte Island who migrated to Talisay, Cebu, in search of childcare work. She was held in a house by her employers against her will. The case did not result in a prosecution, but the girl was freed and paid the wages owed to her when the police intervened.

Case 4 – Domestic worker: This case involved a 49-year-old woman whose home in the city of Ormoc was flattened. She was hired as a domestic worker with two other women, before an employment opportunity arose. In a written case report, an NGO quotes the woman as saying: ‘After one month, my boss’s sister asked me and the other women to work in Iloilo for 3,000 pesos for just one month of work. My husband was against it, but it was only a month and we really needed the money.’ However, she continued: ‘We were trapped there for seven months with no pay. We were beaten badly, and she [the employer] threatened to kill us if we tried to escape.’ According to the NGO’s account, she and the other two women were eventually rescued by village leaders.

Case 5 – Sex work: A woman from Tacloban came to Cebu to stay with her friend to find work following Typhoon Haiyan, according to a local NGO. Her friend invited her on the premise of working as a nanny, but she was subsequently coerced and deceived into sex work, resulting in exploitation—thus meeting the definition of human trafficking. No further details were known by the interviewee.

⁴⁵ ‘Philippines Typhoon Appeal’, Disasters Emergency Committee, 2014, <https://www.dec.org.uk/appeal/philippines-typhoon-appeal>.

Case 6 – Child abuse: A Canadian national was charged under trafficking legislation after four girls, aged nine to 11 years old, were found by police in his hotel room on Cebu Island. At the time of research, this was an ongoing investigation. The City Prosecutor for Cebu told me how the case was connected to the poverty following Typhoon Haiyan, and how victims of Haiyan had been exploited. Notably, this is the only post-Haiyan case to have been specifically reported in the media, apart from the investigation in Tacloban mentioned earlier which was subsequently found to be invalid.

Case 7 – Child labour: This incident occurred three months after the typhoon and was recounted by a human trafficking expert for a local NGO. It involved a number of students recruited from a school in eastern Samar in the severely-affected districts of Veloso and Legazpi. They took up work in a bakery. After two months, one child returned and spoke about significant abuses, along with verbal and sexual harassment and withheld wages. They ate once a day and were sleeping in the bakery. In April 2014, the owner of the bakery was arrested but a prosecution was not pursued. As with other cases of this nature, a question remains as to whether this would qualify as child labour or human trafficking.

Discussion

As a researcher, I was expecting to find a large number of documented cases of human trafficking following this historic disaster. However, with just four recorded incidents and no prosecutions, the findings from the central disaster zone prompt the question: Why were so few cases reported? What does this tell us about post-disaster trafficking risks facing those who remained in the city, and how does this contribute to existing knowledge on the topic? One plausible explanation is the well-known phenomenon that trafficking can be clandestine and under-reported, partly because people do not come forward due to fear of repercussions, shame, or stigma.⁴⁶ The Head of the Women and Children's Shelter in Tacloban City told me: 'I cannot say how many [trafficking cases there have been] because many wanted to go to other places because of the chaos, because of disintegration. There were only food commodities given. Many don't have their houses. No jobs, no livelihood.' There may also be a lag time between the offence occurring and the authorities hearing about it from the person recruited. I conducted these interviews more than three years after the typhoon—though it is conceivable that individuals trafficked after Haiyan may still have been working in slavery-like conditions and their cases remained unknown. Additionally, many individuals severely impacted by Haiyan may have faced exploitation, but these cases may have fallen short of the definition of human trafficking—in other words, the means of force, coercion, or fraud may have been absent. These

⁴⁶ Nykaza, p. 319.

cases would not have come to the fore during my interviews, or even have been known by those I interviewed, because I was specifically asking about trafficking.

It is also notable that none of the three suspected post-disaster trafficking cases from Tacloban ever made it to trial. The City Prosecutor for Tacloban City and Chair of the Regional Task Force on Human Trafficking told me: ‘I know for a fact there were so many incidents of trafficking reported to the DSWD, although these did not mature into actual cases filed with us. Perhaps the victim just gets lost, or cannot be identified, or the victim can no longer be found. Or the victim doesn’t pursue the case. They fail to file the case with us.’ Even recognising under-reporting as a significant issue, and potential capacity issues with the police to detect such crimes and the courts to pursue them through the legal process, it is still surprising that just three trafficking cases were ever detected.

Further themes emerged during the interviews which may go some way towards addressing this apparent anomaly. First is community leaders’ hyper-vigilance. Most stated strongly that they were on ‘high alert’ following Haiyan, thus, possibly, in some instances, preventing trafficking from occurring in the first place. The Mayor of Palo, an urban area south of Tacloban City, told me that she had alerted all of her staff to be on the look-out for suspected traffickers, and that she had personally driven away a group of suspected ‘fake nuns’ from her district (a different set of ‘nuns’ from the aforementioned group in Tacloban City), who were reportedly attempting to recruit children with the offer of school places.

The overall picture, therefore, is of community leaders, officials, NGOs, and law enforcement who are highly aware of the risk of post-disaster trafficking as well as hyper-vigilant and on their guard against suspected traffickers. It is also worth dwelling on the social and political structure of the local government unit which is charged with ‘taking the lead in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from the effects of any disaster’.⁴⁷ Of particular note is that the *purok* system, which comprises smaller neighbourhoods within *barangays*, is often used to deliver services including disaster management.⁴⁸ These *puroks* were active and came to the fore in the aftermath of Haiyan.⁴⁹ However, scepticism is needed around

⁴⁷ L L Mangada, ‘Post-Haiyan Adaptation and Institutional Barriers to Women Survivors in Tacloban’, *Philippine Political Science Journal*, vol. 37, issue 2, 2016, pp. 94–110, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01154451.2016.1196855>.

⁴⁸ ‘Purok System Mobilizes Community, Improves Governance’, Ramon Aboitiz Foundation Inc, 7 May 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20131208051647/http://www.rafi.org.ph/news-highlights/purok-system-2>.

⁴⁹ R R Cheng, ‘Community-based Disaster Risk Reduction and Management in the Philippines: A Science of Delivery Case Study’, in G A Benitez, *Implementing Government Reforms: Science of Delivery Case Studies*, Capstone Project, 2018, p. 65, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/344342191.pdf>.

the assertion that this significantly drove down the number of cases. As stated earlier, human trafficking is often a clandestine activity, with recruitment taking place out of sight—or not perceived as trafficking at the recruitment stage—and the act of exploitation potentially taking place later in the private economy or in workplaces that are not subject to inspections or monitoring.

A second theme that emerged during the interviews was that basic needs such as shelter, food, and water were met to some extent in the central disaster zone. This could have meant that disaster-affected individuals would not necessarily need to take an employment risk because they could survive in Tacloban City with the resources they had. In other words, economic desperation was not as pronounced because of temporary support from the government, bolstered by the huge international aid effort. This included five million food packs which had been distributed in less than two months,⁵⁰ and government and NGO-run cash-for-work programmes resulting in USD 34 million distributed to 1.3 million people.⁵¹ It should be noted that, with many governments now scaling back foreign aid, including in post-disaster contexts, it is probable that similar levels of international support may not be seen in the future.

It should also be acknowledged that the humanitarian effort did not meet everyone's needs and was sometimes slow to arrive,⁵² with one local NGO noting that despite the 'influx of humanitarian assistance', many were struggling to survive.⁵³ Abuse by aid workers themselves has also been recognised as a risk, along with an apparent failure to put typhoon survivors' needs and views at the heart of the recovery process, which can result in a 'divide between outside organisations and local people on how they perceive Build Back Better'.⁵⁴ A nuanced picture of how effectively aid reached survivors in Tacloban is presented by Mangada, a senior academic based in the city, who observes that, while 'there was no shortage of aid, relief efforts were not coordinated'.⁵⁵ She also states that Tacloban City's Disaster Risk Reduction Management Office was 'not functional'—with a high

⁵⁰ T Bowen, *Social Protection and Disaster Risk Management in the Philippines: The Case of Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan)*, Background Paper for S Hallegatte *et al.*, *Shock Waves: Managing the Impacts of Climate Change on Poverty*, World Bank, November 2015.

⁵¹ T Hanley *et al.*, *IASC Inter-agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Typhoon Haiyan Response*, Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Group, 2014, p. 54.

⁵² R Francisco, 'Analysis: Hero to Zero? Philippine President Feels Typhoon Backlash', *Reuters*, 15 November 2013.

⁵³ IBON Foundation.

⁵⁴ Y Su and L Le Dé, 'Whose Views Matter in Post-disaster Recovery? A Case Study of "Build Back Better" in Tacloban City after Typhoon Haiyan', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, vol. 51, 2020, pp. 101786, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2020.101786>.

⁵⁵ Mangada, p. 2.

staff turnover and duties spread over a wide area, limiting its effectiveness—and notes that vulnerable groups were not involved in the planning process.

Turning to the ‘outer disaster zone’ of Cebu and Manila, more cases of trafficking were evident—specifically, seven post-Haiyan trafficking cases involving 25 people, many of them children. While I gleaned this information from a limited number of interviews in a wide geographical area, it is still surprising that more trafficking cases did not come to the fore. Thus, we circle back to the original question: Why were so few trafficking cases detected by the authorities, despite claims and assumptions that trafficking was rife? We are left with some remaining explanations, or, more accurately, speculation. Did trafficking take place on a larger scale but was undetected by the authorities—either because they did not recognise it, or because it occurred somewhere beyond their reach? One plausible setting for this was the temporary shelters where volunteer security forces were present but often ‘shirked their duties’, with illegal activities flourishing.⁵⁶

Was the low number of detected trafficking cases because people were recruited for work in a way that appeared legitimate at the time but later morphed into human trafficking, with exploitation taking place elsewhere, unbeknown to the authorities back in Tacloban City? Or were trafficking cases detected but downplayed by the authorities? If this had occurred, one would assume that staff of local NGOs whom I interviewed would have known about these cases and set the record straight. Or is the answer more straightforward: Were there just very few cases of human trafficking following Typhoon Haiyan? Interviews I conducted at three trafficking shelters in and around Cebu City, in a separate study, yielded first-hand accounts many years later of individuals being trafficked following other disasters much smaller than Haiyan, such as Typhoon Mike (known in the Philippines as Super Typhoon Ruping).⁵⁷ This suggests, therefore, that the likelihood of there being no post-Haiyan trafficking cases is very small.

All of this discussion is focused on unravelling the true extent of post-disaster trafficking—a pursuit that could be seen as playing into the ‘almost obsessive tendency to know the scale, proportion, size, major sectors and geographical concentrations of human trafficking’.⁵⁸ It should also be recognised that efforts to gather trafficking statistics are often carried out in the face of ‘manipulation, misuse and, at worse, neglect of existing evidence altogether by those responsible

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵⁷ C Weeks, ‘The “Slow-Burn Effect” of Human Trafficking Following Disaster’, *Disasters*, vol. 49, issue 3, 2025, pp. e12685, <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12685>.

⁵⁸ S Yea, ‘Editorial: The politics of Evidence, Data and Research in Anti-trafficking Work’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 8, 2017, pp. 1–13, p. 2, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121781>.

for collecting this data.⁵⁹ Trafficking cases are often exaggerated,⁶⁰ with observations that the claim of post-disaster trafficking ‘always flourishes on the heels of a catastrophe’ leading to ‘an emotional investment in the drama of disaster’ and the result ‘something akin to moral panic’.⁶¹

While uncertainty remains about the true extent of post-disaster trafficking, this paper departs from existing narratives in terms of *when* vulnerability to trafficking occurs. What is absent in typical accounts is the multi-step process described by my interviewees. Disaster does not lead *directly* to human trafficking as might be assumed; instead, it leads to economic desperation and loss of livelihoods which, in turn, leads to a frantic search for work in a precarious labour market. This, then, can feature the risk of recruitment through deception or coercion which leads to exploitation—thus meeting the definition of human trafficking, with the original disaster serving as a trigger or ‘shock’.

Trafficking survivors from other disasters described this process to me. One interviewee told me how the roof of her family home blew off in a typhoon, and how she sought work to pay for repairs and avoid the threat of the structure being demolished. She was subsequently trafficked during this search for employment. Another described how a typhoon virtually destroyed the family home, forcing them to build a new one which pushed them into financial hardship and prompted a desperate search for work which resulted in human trafficking.⁶² These cases reinforce the notion that trafficking does not take place immediately after a disaster. Rather, the initial shock of the disaster leads to economic hardship, a search for work, and recruitment, which is then followed by human trafficking as the final step.

How does the timing of vulnerability align with existing anti-trafficking programmes? One obvious set of pre-trafficking interventions are ‘awareness campaigns’ run by local governments and NGOs. The DSWD, which conducts such outreach, is strongly integrated into the country’s disaster response efforts, with awareness-raising measures having taken place immediately after Haiyan. The IOM was another prominent player, launching a ‘Victim-Centered Counter-Trafficking Awareness’ project in affected areas in cooperation with the Philippines’ Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking and the US Embassy

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶⁰ K Bales, ‘What is the Link between Natural Disasters and Human Trafficking and Slavery?’ *Slavery and Humanitarian Response Supplemental*, vol. 6, issue 3, 2021, pp. 34–45, p. 34 <https://doi.org/10.22150/jms/MOJJ8604>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶² Weeks, p. 12.

in Manila.⁶³ Even outside the context of disaster, campaigns in the Philippines frequently warn people about the perils of trafficking and how to avoid it, such as a high-profile ‘anti-trafficking week’ I saw in Cebu during which a series of public events were taking place which included street dramas, speeches, and music performances.

The effectiveness and impact of anti-trafficking campaigns are notoriously difficult to measure. Would a campaign really stop someone from accepting a dubious job offer? Does an individual facing extreme economic desperation after a disaster only need information about trafficking in order to decline a job offer that appears dubious or ‘too good to be true’?⁶⁴ In reality, they may not have any choice but to take that risk. It may also be impossible for an individual to detect if anything is untoward at the moment of recruitment.

Post-disaster financial support would remove the need to migrate in search of work in unfamiliar cities and accept job offers from dubious employers. Indeed, support was provided following Haiyan, as stated above. However, providing meaningful economic support for millions of disaster survivors for a protracted period, to ensure they do not need to search for work at a time of vulnerability, would be difficult for the Philippine government. Detection is also stepped up in times of disaster. One example of this is the aforementioned ‘migration outflow desk’ at Tacloban Airport, which ensured minors could not evacuate without their relatives. As previously stated, this did in fact lead to the detection of one case, though this was later dropped by the authorities as a misunderstanding. One government official in Lapu-Lapu City, near Cebu, described the management of evacuation routes following Haiyan: ‘You cannot just leave all by your own. Even if they [disaster survivors] say they have relatives, we check first before we let them go. We are very strict because there were instructions from the regional office to watch out, because these victims are easy prey for vultures who prey on the human trafficking [sic]’.

⁶³ *Victim-centered Counter-trafficking Project Is Launched in Tacloban City: IOM Philippines and the US State Department Rejoin Forces to Combat Human Trafficking*, International Organisation for Migration (IOM), October 2014, https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/migrated_files/Country/docs/Victim-Centered-Counter-Trafficking-Project-is-launched-in-Tacloban-City.pdf.

⁶⁴ K Sharapov, S Hoff, and B Gerasimov, ‘Editorial: Knowledge is Power, Ignorance is Bliss: Public Perceptions and Responses to Human Trafficking’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 13, 2019, pp. 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201219131>.

Conclusion

The typical disaster-trafficking discourse has leaned on a narrative that vulnerabilities are heightened in the wake of a calamity, plunging those affected into a state of economic desperation which elevates their risk of exploitation.⁶⁵ In the mind's eye, there may be a picture of a chaotic post-disaster scene with decimated communities and traffickers lurking on the sidelines as law and order breaks down, ready to recruit their victims. The reality could not be more different. Despite a groundswell of public concern about post-Haiyan trafficking in Tacloban City among hyper-vigilant local officials, who even reported driving away 'fake nuns' attempting to abduct children, there were just four cases investigated by the authorities. One of these was flawed from the start, and none resulted in prosecution. Therefore, according to the evidence gathered for this study, *no one* in Tacloban City was ever charged or convicted for post-Haiyan trafficking. Furthermore, the very few cases that were investigated in the city occurred several months after the disaster, rather than in its immediate aftermath.

It is apparent, however, that nearly all of the reported cases involved children, endorsing the common NGO and media refrain that minors are most vulnerable following disaster.⁶⁶ Furthermore, political interference in one case echoes claims

in the literature that corruption 'oils the wheels of trafficking'.⁶⁷ Thus, there remains a clear tension between the grand claims about post-disaster trafficking from local officials, politicians, and NGOs which are reflected in international news outlets, and the very small number of cases actually detected on the ground. In this paper, I have explored various possibilities about why this may be the case, including community leaders' hyper-vigilance and basic needs being met with humanitarian assistance. However, none of these is conclusive or a panacea for preventing cases of trafficking.

Despite very few trafficking cases coming to the fore, it can be seen that moving away from the worst-affected disaster zone to seek employment in unfamiliar cities increases trafficking risks more than staying put in the central disaster zone. This is because individuals often arrive at their new destination with few resources and no connections to seek bona-fide employment. In other words, the post-disaster trafficking phenomenon is 'displaced' from the central disaster zone to more peripheral areas, as individuals affected evacuate, migrate, or are displaced, and seek employment elsewhere with the multi-step process of disaster leading to

⁶⁵ Shelley.

⁶⁶ Atzet.

⁶⁷ A P Guth, 'Human Trafficking in the Philippines: The Need for an Effective Anti-corruption Program', *Trends in Organized Crime*, vol. 13, issue 2, 2010, pp. 147–166, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-009-9082-0>.

economic desperation which, in turn, leads to a precarious employment search and possibly trafficking.

As ‘climate change manifests through more intense extreme weather events, including heatwaves, droughts and heavy rainfall’ each year⁶⁸ with growing damage and losses, preventing disaster-induced trafficking becomes increasingly important. It is therefore hoped that this paper, while based on a single case study, contributes to the current knowledge on this phenomenon. It also challenges widespread assumptions that traffickers may exploit people in a central disaster zone in the immediate aftermath of such events.

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⁶⁸ B Clarke *et al.*, ‘Extreme Weather Impacts of Climate Change: An Attribution Perspective’, *Environmental Research Climate*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2022, pp. 012001, <https://doi.org/10.1088/2752-5295/ac6e7d>.