

## Trump claims “Venezuela does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking” – but what about the US?

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The dramatic and depressing start to the new year, with the US political intervention into Venezuela, has been framed as an operation targeting human trafficking networks. The US Department of State ‘2025 Trafficking in Persons: Venezuela’ Report makes clear that “*Venezuela does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so*”. This includes various types of human trafficking and exploitation with references to labour, criminal and sexual exploitation specifically targeting children and/or “*persons who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual*”. The report mentions the lack of criminal trafficking legislation and a failure to appropriately respond to organised crime, noting 60 suspected trafficking cases involving 211 victims, of whom 94% were exploited for sex trafficking and 6% for labour trafficking.

Human trafficking and exploitation (or Modern Slavery) represents one of the greatest health challenges of our times.<sup>i, ii</sup> The UNODC (2024) concluded that the most common forms of trafficking include trafficking of persons for sexual exploitation (36%), primarily women and girls, and for labour exploitation (42%). Worldwide, approximately 38% of trafficking and exploitation victims are children.<sup>iii</sup> This is an area of empirical investigation that we explored in relation to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children from Home Office hotels in the United Kingdom.<sup>iv, v</sup> It is this that brings us to our key point, trafficking and exploitation is not a protection failure isolated to Venezuela.

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In the US, Human Trafficking is recognized as a public health crisis with over 218,000 trafficking victims identified since 2007. In 2024, 11,999 cases involving 21,865 victims were identified whereof 6,647 (55%) involved sexual exploitation and 2,220 (19%) labour exploitation. These included 2,666 minors and 149 individuals identifying as gender minorities.<sup>vi, vii</sup> The figures are only the tip of the iceberg as victims and demographics are only collected when appropriate. A 2023 US survey with 457 trafficking and exploitation survivors (91% sexual exploitation, 86% female participants born in the US, and 45% identifying as LGBTQ+) showed that 40% had ended up with a criminal record whereof 90% attributed this to the exploitation.<sup>viii</sup>

We must not compare human suffering, but we must ask why the limited number of Venezuelan trafficking and exploitation victims identified in the US Department of State report is treated as sufficient justification for foreign state intervention. Each trafficking victim-survivor represents a state failure, but we do not expect foreign intervention in the US based on its insufficiently meeting its obligations under the 2000 Palermo Protocol.<sup>ix</sup> This inconsistency suggests that concerns of human trafficking are being selectively used to justify political intervention, rather than treating trafficking as a universal public health and human rights concern – such framing risks weakening the global action against trafficking and exploitation.

## Word count

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## Biography

[Prof Sonja Ayeb-Karlsson, PhD](#) is a Professor of Intersectional Justice at University College London (UCL) where she leads UCL's [\*Everyday Disasters and Violences Research Group\*](#). Her [research](#) is broad and interdisciplinary with a particular focus on violence and (legal) entrapment, and their overlaps with migration, refugees, trafficking, health and mental wellbeing. Prof Ayeb-Karlsson also directs the mental health work of the [\*Lancet Countdown\*](#) and two modules on humanitarian policy and responses to violence and marginalisation. Her work is well-published and widely covered by media outlets across the world.

Tyler Valiquette is a PhD candidate in Human Geography at University College London and a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Doctoral Fellow. His research examines queer migration from Venezuela to Brazil and Colombia, with a focus on state, humanitarian, and community responses to displacement. He has conducted over 200 interviews with LGBTQI+ Venezuelan migrants and refugees across Brazil and Colombia and has held fellowships at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford.

## References

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