

Development of Intelligence Collection and Analysis on Sex Trafficking: A Challenge for “Rescue” NGOs

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ABSTRACT

Rescue NGOs are organisations that conduct tactical operations targeting bars or brothels and other establishments, with the intent of releasing people from situations of sexual exploitation. Their role in counter trafficking comes under significant criticism - predominantly for acting unilaterally and without regard for the impact their ‘raids’ have on trafficked victims and sex workers. This article will suggest that rescue NGOs are better placed to develop intelligence collection and analysis capabilities. It challenges rescue NGOs to rethink the paramilitary approach and train its rescue volunteers in intelligence collection and analysis. It encourages greater collaborations, training and awareness.

Key words: Rescue NGOs, Intelligence, Sex trafficking, Capability, Volunteer, South East Asia

INTRODUCTION

Non-Government Organisations play a variety of roles in developing nations. Beyond the distribution of aid – such as food, water and sanitation – NGOs are working in the field of social welfare and justice. Specifically, there are NGOs involved in rescuing people from situations of sexual exploitation. “Rescue” NGOs have emerged as a minor participant on the NGO landscape but its work carries major implications for its rescued and the volunteers who undertake rescue operations. While rescue operations are sometimes done with the help of local law enforcement agencies they also tend to work unilaterally. Rescue NGO operatives are sometimes former police officers of junior ranks driven by noble cause justifications even at the risk of violating local laws. Others are untrained volunteers acting on their own to gather intelligence or reconnaissance. Lack of training exposes risks to the volunteer operative

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and the people they are trying to help. The risk by NGOs conducting intelligence or reconnaissance includes mistaking sex workers for those trafficked and volunteers being exposed by those organising the trafficking of people. All of which concern the physical safety of the volunteer and the person in situations of sexual exploitation.

Underlining those risks is the lack of intelligence training in operational trade craft and intelligence analysis. It is proposed that through better tradecraft and establishing fundamental analytical methods, rescue NGOs will be better equipped to conduct their operations. The immediate solution is having volunteers and staff trained by academics and practitioners who possess intelligence and reconnaissance skills and knowledge. While the focus of this exploration is better training and tradecraft for undeterred rescue NGOs– it is recognised that there are broader questions about the legitimacy of rescue NGOs involvement in situations of sexual exploitation. There are also further questions regarding concerns that rescue NGOs may not have the financial resources to mitigate against risks of physical harm to its operatives and victims of situations of sexual exploitation. These questions and concerns are important but not within the scope of this article and would make a worthy separate analysis.

BACKGROUND

The role of NGOs in conducting “rescues” of women and children from brothels and bars in parts of South East Asia has gained considerable media coverage in the West (US DOS, 2017). The practice of NGO volunteers taking part in so-called raids on places where they alleged situations of sexual exploitation is taking pace is depicted more akin to a paramilitary operation than a rescue mission. Its marketing material rescue NGOs tend to exaggerate its contribution to combating situations of sexual exploitation. There is a tendency by some NGOs to overstate the military backgrounds of its rescuers with NGO promotional material portraying armed men conducting military-like manoeuvres (Moore, 2015). In part, it is this paramilitary approach that is likely causing rescues to be scrutinised, with opponents suggesting they do more harm than good.

Some other concerns involve the use of local law enforcement. Some rescue NGOs actively contribute to the lack of capacity in local law enforcement by doing the work for them. In other instances rescue NGOs recruit active law enforcement officers to provide intelligence on cases or organise non-approved cross border operational incursions into neighbouring jurisdictions with local law enforcement officers. Some references in the subject literature suggests NGO rescues have a negative impact on victims in situations of sexual exploitation. Further, it contributes little to the reduction of the crime and often mistakes those voluntarily working in the sex industry for trafficked persons (Walters, 2017). Despite those debates, there is no evidence to indicate rescue NGOs will cease operations. They will continue rescues as long as they are allowed to work with relevant local law enforcement agencies and funded by donations and government aid by providers such as USAid or the US Department of Justice. So, as long as rescue NGOs continue to operate, it is posited that they will require a greater sophistication along with greater maturity in their approach and methodologies.

In some instances 'intelligence critical to the successful identification and investigation of traffickers is likely to be provided to NGOs and not police' (David 2007) Where rescue NGOs can provide the most benefit is through developing better intelligence collection and analysis methods that will generate intelligence reports with information police may not be able to obtain. These reports could also be drafted to assist other NGOs working with victims in situations of sexual exploitation and of course local law enforcement. With better intelligence capabilities and training, the rescue NGOs are more likely to provide tactical intelligence for law enforcement agencies as well as operational-level intelligence for themselves to inform their future work.

CRITICISMS OF RESCUE NGOS IN LITERATURE

In a study undertaken by sociologist Stephanie Limoncelli (2016), NGOs that reported to be engaged in rescue activities of women and children were only a fraction of the overall NGOs working in the field of human trafficking. According to Limoncelli only 7% of NGOs reported they were actively conducting rescues. Fewer still were active in investigating human trafficking cases or forming groups to look for signs of trafficking

in “red light districts, bordertowns or villages (Limoncelli, 2016) Limoncelli suggests only 2% undertake those activities with most of that work taking place in Asia, the United States and Sub-Saharan Africa (Limoncelli 2016). Despite the small number of NGOs involved in rescues and investigations, the literature surrounding rescue NGOs is tempus of opinion and tension. Broadly, the arguments against rescue NGOs are around the inability for those organisations to correctly identify those that have trafficked into sex work. Essentially, the criticism levied at rescue NGOs includes their inability to discern between women who have made a choice to work in the sex industry and those that have been forced or coerced.

Elena Shih in her work *Not in My Backyard Abolitionism: Vigilante Rescue against American Sex Trafficking* (2016) highlights at least two deficiencies in the rescue of sex trafficked women. First, she acknowledges that there is a degree of cultural incompetence. Rescuers often are unable to speak the language of the women involved and operate without an understanding of the socio-cultural background of those they rescue. Second, the rescue groups lack true situational awareness. A common error is mistaking legitimate massage parlours for brothels. The error in identification is primarily caused by an inability to conduct proper surveillance (Shih, 2016).

In a submission made by the Thai based Empower Foundation—a sex worker advocacy organisation—to the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW) they highlighted a problem with rescue NGOs superseding the role of local law enforcement and conducting what they describe as entrapment operations. Further, the Empower Foundation described rescue NGOs conducting operations where minors are identified working in a brothel within the first 48 hours of an operation but are left in those brothels for periods of up to three months while further evidence is collected (Empowerment Foundation, 2019). It is not surprising that the Empower Foundation made the recommendation in their submission that NGOs need greater accountability and must be bound by the same laws and policies as state agencies and law enforcement (Empowerment Foundation, 2019). In response to this criticism rescue NGOs should be familiar with and base

their intelligence collection activities on codes of conduct from their country of origin and host country. For example understanding limitations to covert collection set out in the *United Kingdom's Covert Human Intelligence Code of Practice* (2018) or the Metropolitan Police's *Covert Policing Standards Policy* (2015).

TYPOLOGY OF RESCUE NGOS

Rescue NGOs are often Christian based groups made up of volunteers. Groups such as Destiny Rescue, Operation Underground Rescue, and Exodus Road work in South East Asia. Their websites emphasise the law enforcement or military background of its operatives and founders. In some of the imagery and marketing they are often leading local law enforcement raids on bars or brothels sometimes dressed in paramilitary clothing. They are financed through private donations and in some instances, government funding (Hoff, 2012). They are non-for-profit entities. It logically follows that rescue NGOs require a good working relationship with local law enforcement. The most successful in building local law enforcement relationships are rescue NGOs that have operatives with policing backgrounds.

RESCUE TYPOLOGY

There are two types of rescue operations conducted by NGOs. These operations are termed as “hard” or “soft” operations. Both have similar starting points, which involves operatives (i.e., NGO volunteers) scouting possible places where trafficking may occur—usually bars or brothels. Typically, these operatives will use hidden cameras to film the premises and record conversations with owners, managers, and the women/girls “working” there.

In the case of a soft rescue, operatives will request time with a targeted sex worker under the pretence they are seeking to pay the workers for sex. Once they are alone with the worker, they will softly question her about the work she is doing and if she is there willingly. Over several visits the operative will attempt to gain the workers trust and then tell the worker their real intention and ask the worker if she is wanting to leave. If the worker is willing to leave, a further plan is made to extract the worker from

the place of business to social workers who will assist with repatriating the worker home or to some other form of accommodation.

The hard operation also involve the use of an operative to scout the premises of a bar or brothel. Overtime they will compile what investigators refer to as a brief of evidence; that is, evidence of trafficking or underage prostitution before taking that evidence to local law enforcement officials. Local law enforcement agencies will act on the information by conducting a raid on the premises. In some instances, local law enforcement will provide the NGO operative with marked currency that they will use for payment for time with the sex worker. On exchange of money or at the time of choosing, local law enforcers will raid the premises releasing the women and children by arresting the perpetrators.

From an intelligence point of view, there is a problem with the operational planning of rescue NGOs (Prunckun, 2015). The problems are centred on poor risk management and are pertinent to soft and hard rescues. NGO operatives are likely to be exposed by bar and brothel owners. The NGO operatives are essentially working as police informers, but without a thorough knowledge of covert practices and understanding of ethical issues such as collateral intrusion. Often rescue NGOs are working without the supervision of law enforcement, judicial oversight or any resources that would normally assist an official undercover operation.

CURRENT INTELLIGENCE COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Given covert nature of NGOs work, it is difficult to get an absolute understanding of all their current intelligence collection and analysis methods. However, there are some elements that become self-evident. A chief issue is the reliance on tactical training at the expense of operational-level intelligence. This is coupled with a lack of interest in the preparation and dissemination of intelligence reports that would be of value not only to law enforcement agencies, but other NGOs working to address human trafficking.

As an example, the Christian-based trafficking rescue NGO, *Destiny Rescue*, describes the kinds of activities its operatives undertake on its website (Destiny Rescue, 2019) in its call for volunteers to work in its anti-sex trafficking operations. The training they offer spans two weeks and

includes 20 hours of hand-to-hand defensive training, training on use of undercover cameras, local language training, training on policies and procedures, and the use of roleplay in trafficking scenarios (Destiny Rescue, 2019). They state that within two days of joining the team they will be placed in brothels and bars undertaking real operations (Destiny Rescue, 2019). The types of activities new operatives undertaken include, posing as a customer in bars and brothels to identify trafficking victims, gathering intelligence to build a case for local law enforcement, take part in soft rescues without help from local police, follow suspected of what the organisation calls “pimps and paedophiles,” building rapport with them to gather intelligence to build a legal case against them, GPS mapping of bars and brothels and being “burnt” in a police raid (Destiny Rescue 2019) . The expression *burnt* means that the operatives cover is exposed. It appears that having the operatives cover exposed during the police raid of a premises is part of the operational practice and *Destiny Rescue* refers to the position as a “burn rescue agent.” (Destiny Rescue, 2019). This implies a certain expendability of the operatives not to mention safety implications.

PROBLEMS WITH CURRENT PRACTICE

Rescue NGOs will emphasise surveillance and reconnaissance as an important part of their operation. It also appears evident there are aspects of human intelligence collection. Surveillance, reconnaissance, and human intelligence collection are high-risk activities, usually undertaken by well-trained personnel. Providing a two-week training course and expecting the operatives to have their covers exposed does not provide sustainability and opportunity for the operative to develop their practice. Further, most of the rescue work that takes place in South East Asia realistically requires using local operatives to undertake surveillance of targets. Tailing targets in locations where foreigners seldom visit or are easily identified would make operatives too visible to those involved in sex trafficking. In short, collection of human intelligence from those involved in trafficking is incredibly high-risk and requires a high level of skill and patience.

According to the subject literature, an ongoing difficulty for rescue NGOs is the inability distinguish between those trafficked and those working in the industries of their own free will. This is problematic for both soft and

hard rescues. A failure to identify the difference can impact not only on the operation, but also expose the operative to risk.

The soft rescue involves revealing the true intent of the operative without police support. A person working in the bar or brothel, they may reject any assistance from the operative and feel obliged (or frightened not to) to let the owner know they have been made an offer of rescue.

The impact that hard rescues have on victims of trafficking and sex workers has been well documented by groups such as the *Empower Foundation* who cited: lack of planning in support for those removed from the bar and brothel along with the emotional distress sex workers experience during a police and rescue NGO raids. Hard rescues cannot be a unilateral operation, it requires significant support staff for the sex workers and trafficked persons after the raids. Provisions for victims of trafficking and sex workers post raid must be in place as part of the operational plan and can only be done through cooperation with other NGOs. Unfortunately, this is seldom included in the plan.

INTELLIGENCE COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS POSSIBILITIES

Given the importance of training in conducting intelligence guided operations, the need for a training role immediately presents itself. NGOs could benefit from having training in creating efficient intelligence units. It must also place less emphasis on tactical raids and more attention to working with social welfare NGOs. A strength of the rescue NGO could be its ability to collect data, provide analysis, and develop intelligence reports that assist social welfare NGOs and plan joint extraction of those working in bars and brothels who are being trafficked.

Developing a better understanding of the sex trafficking organisation through intelligence products such as *target profiles* and *operational assessments* and furnishing local law enforcement agencies and social welfare NGOs with these reports are more likely to be of value in inhibiting sex trafficking at both the tactical and policy levels.

Intelligence collection and analysis skills are not always possessed by military and law enforcement personnel with tactical operational experience. Instead, staffing rescue NGO volunteers with intelligence collection and analysis experience or training will improve knowledge of

sex trafficking patterns and trends. Utilising academic social scientists also provides an opportunity for developing the ability to understand future policy implications for their operational intelligence. Such training in intelligence collection and analysis could also be extended to NGOs working to provide victim support. Training NGOs in interview skills and the importance of intelligence would assist in developing greater intelligence collection capabilities from those working with victims.

For an operational-level intelligence approach using predictive estimates or policy reviews are vital. Establishing remote intelligence units comprised of academics or social scientists (MacLeod, 2013) could provide wider assessment by putting the rescue NGO into the broader anti-trafficking context. Operational-level intelligence complimented with on-the-ground intelligence collection has the potential for an assessment to impact policy or high-level decision making to affect outcomes as well as outputs.

With the right collection and analysis of data there are a suite of intelligence products that can be drafted and circulated to local law enforcement agencies and social welfare NGOs. Developing target profile and operational assessments, event charts, heat maps, and network diagrams are of value to all concerned with countering sex trafficking. Because rescue NGOs are “on the ground” with the right training, they could collect data and analyse it in-house and distribute it to clients comprising of law enforcement and social welfare NGOs.

ESTABLISHING INTELLIGENCE CAPABILITIES

The challenges to restructure rescue activities into a partnership with social welfare NGOs and local law enforcement begins with the rescue NGO reconsidering the type of demand that exists for their service. Rescue NGOs should consider the actual demand for the services it offers and identify what aspects of their current operation has longer term success in reducing sex trafficking. This kind of re-evaluation takes honest reflection by NGO managers. Using reflective methods such as cooperative inquiry (Rearson, 1995) and Gibb’s reflective learning cycle (Quinton & Smallbone, 2010) will provide a vehicle for the kind of reflection necessary for identifying the longer term relevance of rescue NGOs.

Cooperative inquiry involves individuals first reflecting on the role of the rescue NGO then bringing those reflections to a larger group where the perspectives are shared and discussions had about how changes that could be made. The Gibbs's reflective learning cycle is commonly used in education settings but has relevance for all organisations. The Gibb's cycle follows some set questions to assist in the reflective process (Quinton & Smallbone, 2010). During the reflective exercise it is likely that rescue NGOs will identify its true operational strengths for supplying tactical and operational intelligence.

Reflecting on operational success and failures lead to understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the rescue NGOs. The rescue NGO's could then conduct a SWOT analysis of the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats of their operations and identify what intelligence capabilities are required to develop sustainable intelligence collection practices. It can also assist in identifying existing and required resources to develop intelligence analysis methods that produce reports that inform the decision making of law enforcement and other NGOs working in the field. An environmental scan analysis would assist the rescue NGO reacquainting itself with the operational environment. The environmental scan would also assist the rescue NGOs understand the actual needs and motivations of other NGOs working to counter sex trafficking.

As discussed, reflection leads to identifying what intelligence capabilities are already available and what are required. But there are a number of other measures required to establish intelligence capabilities that need to be implemented. Developing networks for information sharing, building trust with local law enforcement and other NGOs are essential to an effective sex trafficking intelligence operation. Within the NGO community building trust is particularly precarious. NGO's have a reluctance to associate themselves with intelligence collection or analysis. Seen as a covert or perhaps even a sinister activity there are many NGOs working in the social welfare and justice field that reject any notion that intelligence collection should be part of their enterprise (Whitford & Prunckun, 2017).

Having a clear understanding of the kind of intelligence required needs to be at the forefront of an intelligence operation. An important measure is

drafting intelligence requirements – that is; questions that the rescue NGO want answered. Developing intelligence requirements will keep the operation focused on its objectives. Accompanying intelligence requirements are intelligence collection plans – what needs to be collected and how it will be collected to answer those questions or requirements. Finally, an analytical plan will outline how the intelligence collected will be analysed and presented.

There is certainly more involved in developing intelligence capability than outlined above. Understanding all the elements involved requires education and training in intelligence collection and analysis. Rescue NGO volunteers require training in intelligence collection trade craft and analysis. Employing or seeking assistance from practitioners or academics in the field of intelligence and security studies would progress the role of rescue NGOs as intelligence providers. Online training packages development by academic and practitioners and offered to prospective NGO rescue volunteers prior to deployment could provide the necessary theoretical aspects to intelligence collection and analysis. This training could then be built upon once in the field. Training of this nature not only improves the skill set and focus of rescue NGOs but also give the volunteer sustainable value rather than being deliberately ‘burnt’ after only one operation.

CONCLUSION

Rescue NGOs, while only a fraction of the NGOs working to stop sex trafficking, will remain an operational feature in counter trafficking. Little will deter their zeal and enthusiasm. What can be achieved is a professionalisation of the operatives which will lead to greater sensitivity to the operational environment and improve the skill set. The challenged for rescue NGOs is to move from paramilitary tactics into the realm of intelligence collection and analysis. Rescue NGOs must adapt to working with other NGOs, and law enforcement through providing intelligence reports and becoming independent experts in the local sex trafficking trade. Proving this kind of support is less intrusive, more sustainable and recognises that combating sex trafficking takes a holistic and planned approach.

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