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Gender Differences in Attitudes and Perceptions of Human Trafficking: Are They Driven by Knowledge Gaps?

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing awareness of human trafficking, research has yet to explore whether attitudes and knowledge about this issue are affected by gender. This study fills that gap by analyzing gender differences in public perceptions of human trafficking using a nationally representative U.S. sample ($N = 776$). The findings reveal that women are more likely than men to associate human trafficking with a wider range of vulnerable groups and forms of exploitation, perceive it as more severe, and are more likely to attribute it to systemic causes, including gender inequality and institutional corruption. Though knowledge predicted attitudes, men and women demonstrated no significant gender differences in factual knowledge. These results suggest that social and cultural influences shape gendered perceptions of human trafficking, underscoring the importance of integrating gender perspectives into anti-trafficking awareness campaigns and public education efforts.

KEYWORDS

Gender gaps;
human-trafficking attitudes;
sex trafficking; labor
tracking; public attitudes;
public knowledge

Introduction

Public attitudes toward human trafficking shape both policy responses and societal support for survivors (Buckley, 2009). Despite the increased public discourse and policy attention to trafficking globally, widespread misconceptions persist, particularly within the United States (U.S.), regarding its prevalence, underlying causes, and manifestations (Bonilla & Mo, 2019; Cunningham & Cromer, 2016; Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016). In the U.S. context, public understanding of trafficking often narrowly associates the issue primarily with sexual exploitation, neglecting other significant dimensions such as forced labor and within national borders trafficking cases (Bonilla & Mo, 2019). These narrowed perceptions could limit comprehensive policy-making and hinder effective support for survivors by obscuring recognition of diverse victim experiences.

The specific factors shaping attitudes toward human trafficking – such as socio-demographic, attitudinal, and knowledge-based characteristics – remain underexplored, particularly regarding how knowledge and gender intersect to influence these perceptions. Gender appears central in understanding public perceptions of trafficking, as women consistently exhibit greater concern and support for victim-centered policies compared to men (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016; Tverdova, 2011). Gender differences in public attitudes toward trafficking is another underexplored area of research, with no studies focused primarily or specifically on gender gaps in trafficking knowledge.

This study directly addresses this gap by examining how gender shapes knowledge and attitudes toward human trafficking. Specifically, we investigate whether women are more likely than men to associate trafficking with vulnerable groups, perceive it as a more serious issue, and attribute trafficking causes to systemic factors such as gender inequality and institutional corruption. Additionally, we

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assess whether gender differences in trafficking attitudes persist after accounting for knowledge levels, testing whether disparities in factual knowledge explain, or fail to explain, these attitudinal gaps. We draw on a gendered framing perspective to interpret these patterns, focusing on how gendered socialization influences the ways individuals respond to structural versus individualistic explanations for human trafficking.

The study proceeds as follows. First, we review the literature on public attitudes toward human trafficking, highlighting key socio-demographic, attitudinal, and knowledge-based predictors. We then examine gender as a distinct factor, drawing on the literature on gender gaps in political attitudes to contextualize its influence on trafficking perceptions. Following this, we explore the potential role of knowledge in shaping these gendered differences in perceptions. We then introduce our hypotheses, first outlining expected gender gaps in trafficking attitudes and then assessing whether differences in knowledge help explain these gaps. Next, we detail our methodological approach, including data, analytical methods, and predictor variables. Finally, we present our findings and discuss their implications for policymaking, educational interventions, and future research on public perceptions of human trafficking.

Attitudes Toward Human Trafficking

While attitudes toward human trafficking vary, several general trends consistently emerge from existing research. Studies have found that the public primarily associates trafficking with the commercial sex industry, children, and migrants, often overlooking labor trafficking and other forms of exploitation (Bonilla & Mo, 2019; Bouché et al., 2018). This narrow perception is reinforced by media portrayals that emphasize the sexual exploitation of young, foreign women while neglecting other forms like forced labor and organ trafficking (Shafer & Looney, 2018). In the U.S. context, these portrayals also draw on a longer history of racialized and gendered narratives, such as early 20th-century “white slave trade” panics, which portrayed white American women as victims of dangerous male immigrants and helped frame trafficking in moralistic and nationalistic terms (Baker, 2018; Haynes, 2009). Contemporary anti-trafficking discourse continues to reflect these dynamics by casting some women as more sympathetic or “savable” than others, influenced by intersections of race, gender, and perceived sexual purity (Musto, 2016; Shih, 2021, 2023). Bouché et al. (2018) found that public concern and support for anti-trafficking policies are highest when victims are framed as minors, while labor trafficking elicits significantly less concern. Similarly, Bonilla and Mo (2019) demonstrated that messaging that emphasizes sex trafficking leads to stronger public reactions compared to messaging that highlights other trafficking forms.

Perceptions of trafficking severity also vary based on framing. Studies have shown that victims perceived as having been kidnapped receive greater sympathy than those groomed or coerced into trafficking (Shafer & Looney, 2018). This reflects a broader pattern in public discourse that favors “ideal” or “iconic” victims, typically imagined as innocent, passive, and forcibly taken, while casting suspicion on those whose experiences deviate from this narrative (Musto, 2016; Shih, 2023). Additionally, research indicates that trafficking myths, such as the belief that victims can easily escape, shape public attitudes, often reducing empathy for survivors (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016; Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016). Given these general trends and the persistence of misconceptions, it is important to examine systematically what individual-level factors predict variation in public attitudes toward human trafficking.

Predictors of Human Trafficking Attitudes

Several socio-demographic factors could influence attitudes toward human trafficking, including age, race, education, income and geographic location. Research notes that older respondents are more likely to see trafficking as a breakdown in social order and morality (Buckley, 2009). Contrary to expectations, research suggests that higher education levels do not consistently predict greater

awareness of human trafficking. Instead, individuals with lower levels of education tend to have a more accurate understanding of trafficking's general applicability to different genders and age groups, while those with more education are better at identifying multiple types of trafficking (Bogdan, 2020). While not explicitly testing for information, studies find that those with greater awareness of human trafficking are more likely to reject common myths, express concern for victims, and support victim-centered policies (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016; Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016). For example, Mojtahedi et al. (2024) show that inaccurate or limited knowledge about trafficking, particularly in the context of sex trafficking, is associated with lower levels of empathy for victims.

Socioeconomic status further shapes attitudes, as lower-income individuals and those from disadvantaged backgrounds report greater interaction with anti-trafficking awareness materials, possibly due to heightened vulnerability or proximity to affected populations (Bogdan, 2020). Meanwhile, race and ethnicity may also play a role in shaping trafficking perceptions, though existing research on these differences remains limited. Finally, Bogdan (2020) found that rural residents in Moldova were more knowledgeable about trafficking risks than urban populations, likely due to targeted awareness campaigns and personal connections to trafficking victims. However, it is not clear if these results hold in other countries, like the U.S.

Political ideology plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of trafficking and policy support. de Vries et al. (2019) found that anti-immigration sentiment is associated with a paradoxical stance on trafficking: individuals with stronger anti-immigrant views recognize that immigrants are vulnerable to trafficking but are less supportive of victim services for non-citizens. Alternatively, Tverdova (2011) found that pro-immigration attitudes correlate with greater concern for trafficking, suggesting that ideological orientations shape whether trafficking is perceived as a human rights issue or a security concern. Bonilla and Mo (2019) further demonstrate that different frames of human trafficking messaging, such as portraying it as a national security issue versus a humanitarian crisis, can elicit varied public responses, underscoring how ideological perspectives shape responses to the issue. Mojtahedi et al. (2024) find that right-wing ideology is a stronger predictor of negative bias against sex trafficking victims. These patterns suggest that ideology not only affects policy preferences but also conditions how people interpret trafficking as a social and legal concept, including which frames or stereotypes they accept as valid.

Given the strong correlation between political ideology and partisanship in the U.S., partisan differences in attitudes toward human trafficking might be anticipated. However, while closely related, ideology and partisanship are not synonymous; certain partisan issues lack a clear ideological foundation, and some ideological issues may not neatly align with partisan divides. Human trafficking has often been treated as a bipartisan concern, but this apparent consensus masks deeper ideological tensions. As Bernstein (2018) notes, anti-trafficking initiatives have sometimes served as a platform for advancing more conservative ideas about gender, sexuality, labor, and migration under the guise of shared moral concern. These "strange bedfellow" coalitions complicate the notion of bipartisan unity and suggest that anti-trafficking discourse can become a vehicle for specific ideological projects. Indeed, Bonilla and Mo (2018) demonstrate that partisan differences regarding immigration can be lessened when policies are framed around combating human trafficking, illustrating that the relationship between ideology, partisanship, and trafficking attitudes is complex and context dependent.

These socio-demographic and attitudinal predictors illustrate the complexity of public attitudes toward human trafficking, suggesting that targeted interventions should account for diverse audiences and varied socio-political contexts. To further understand the foundations of these attitudes, particularly how knowledge influences perceptions and responses, the next section examines how trafficking knowledge shapes public views.

Knowledge and Human Trafficking Attitudes

Public knowledge about human trafficking varies widely, with many individuals holding misconceptions about its prevalence, causes, and manifestations. Studies indicate that while awareness of human

trafficking is relatively high, understanding of its complexities remains limited, with many people equating trafficking primarily with sexual exploitation while overlooking forced labor, organ trafficking, and other forms of exploitation (Bonilla & Mo, 2019; Bouché et al., 2018). Sharapov (2019) found that public perceptions of trafficking differ significantly across countries, with people in Ukraine showing the highest levels of awareness, likely due to extensive media coverage and direct exposure to labor trafficking cases, whereas respondents in Hungary demonstrated the lowest levels of trafficking knowledge.

Structured educational interventions, such as school-based curricula and professional training programs, significantly improve trafficking knowledge and reduce endorsement of harmful myths (Miller et al., 2023; Salas & Didier, 2020; Scott et al., 2019). Miller et al. (2023) demonstrated that brief, fact-based training interventions were particularly effective at increasing both actual and perceived knowledge while decreasing acceptance of myths. Scott et al. (2019) further found that integrating trafficking education into high-school curricula enhanced students' knowledge, awareness, and willingness to advocate for survivors. Professional contexts also benefit from trafficking-specific education: Ruiz et al. (2024) and Karlson et al. (2022) reported that structured curricula significantly increased medical students' confidence in identifying and responding effectively to trafficking victims. Similarly, Litam et al. (2023) found that prior trafficking education correlated with increased supportive attitudes toward survivors and a reduced acceptance of trafficking-related misconceptions among undergraduate students and medical professionals. While these studies collectively demonstrate the promise of educational interventions, it is important to recognize that they vary in context, scale, and audience. In particular, studies conducted in some countries may reflect higher baseline awareness due to more frequent public campaigns and stronger national engagement with trafficking as a local issue. At the same time, U.S.-based frameworks such as those promoted through the Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP), which is published annually by the U.S. State Department, may shape international understandings of trafficking, allowing some ideas to circulate across national boundaries.

Existing literature consistently links lower trafficking knowledge to greater endorsement of myths about victim agency and limited recognition of structural determinants of trafficking (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016). Houston-Kolnik et al. (2016), through the development of the Sex Trafficking Attitudes Scale (STAS), similarly highlighted how increased knowledge corresponds to lower levels of victim-blaming and greater support for structural and victim-centered interventions. This demonstrates a critical connection between misinformation and ineffective or misguided policy responses, emphasizing the need for accurate, widespread public education. Research also shows that inaccurate trafficking knowledge can undermine institutional responses. Stevens et al. (2023) found that jurors with misconceptions about sex trafficking were less likely to view victims as credible in criminal cases. Similarly, Rajaram and Tidball (2018) reported that police and medical professionals sometimes contributed to secondary victimization by mislabeling survivors as sex workers.

In sum, the literature clearly highlights knowledge as foundational in shaping accurate perceptions and policy attitudes toward human trafficking. Educational interventions that specifically address myths and misconceptions are vital tools for fostering informed public responses and improving support for anti-trafficking initiatives.

Gender and Human Trafficking

Research has consistently identified gender gaps in attitudes toward a wide range of social and political issues in the U.S. Men and women often diverge in their policy preferences, ideological self-placement, and political behaviors, such as voting (Center for American Women and Politics [CAWP], 2024). For instance, studies indicate that men typically display more partisan attitudes than women, with stronger ideological commitments influencing their political behaviors (Conover & Sapiro, 1993). Kaufmann and Petrocik (1999) illustrate how the American gender gap in presidential voting and party identification emerged primarily due to shifts in men's partisanship, driven by differences in social welfare attitudes and the varying salience that men and women assign to certain policy issues. Norrander and

Wilcox (2008) find that gender differences in ideological identification have grown over time, with men increasingly identifying as conservative, while women have become more ideologically polarized, with segments moving both toward conservatism and liberalism. These gender differences also align with global trends, where women's electoral behavior has increasingly shifted toward the left in advanced industrial democracies, reflecting broader structural and cultural shifts (Inglehart & Norris, 2000).

Research indicates notable gender differences in attitudes toward human trafficking, with women consistently expressing greater awareness and concern and stronger support for victim-centered and interventionist policies compared to men (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016; Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016; Tverdova, 2011). For instance, results consistently indicate that women are less likely to blame trafficking victims and more inclined to support systemic explanations for trafficking, emphasizing factors such as poverty, exploitation, and structural vulnerabilities (Digidiki et al., 2016; Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016). Conversely, men were more likely to endorse trafficking myths and victim-blaming attitudes, especially among those who reported prior experience or familiarity with sex industry practices (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016; Digidiki et al., 2016). However, gender was not the central focus of these studies, and their findings emerged from specific contexts or targeted groups, rather than from nationally representative survey research explicitly examining gender differences in attitudes toward human trafficking within broader populations.

The observed gender differences in attitudes toward trafficking likely stem from broader socialization patterns, normative beliefs, and gendered perceptions of victimhood and agency. For example, men's higher likelihood of endorsing trafficking myths and blaming victims aligns with traditional patterns of gender socialization and entrenched beliefs about victim responsibility and agency. For instance, Digidiki et al. (2016) and Digidiki and Baka (2022) highlight how just-world perspectives (the belief that people deserve their outcomes) and sexist attitudes contribute to attributions of responsibility toward trafficking victims, reinforcing narratives that place blame on victims rather than systemic factors. Similarly, Litam et al. (2023) find that human trafficking myths mediate the relationship between hostile sexism and negative perceptions of trafficking survivors, as individuals who hold more sexist beliefs are also more likely to accept trafficking myths, which perpetuates stigma and negative attitudes toward survivors.

Conversely, women's greater empathy and tendency to view trafficking through a systemic lens may reflect patterns of gendered framing shaped by feminist consciousness, higher exposure to discussions on gender-based violence, and greater attunement to structural inequalities that shape vulnerability to trafficking (Conover & Sapiro, 1993; Hansen & Goenaga, 2021). By feminist consciousness, we refer to a critical awareness of systemic gendered power dynamics and a propensity to interpret exploitation as rooted in broader social structures rather than individual pathology or moral failure. This perspective differs from paternalistic or benevolent sexist attitudes, which may express concern for victims but often reinforce traditional gender norms or essentialize vulnerability. For example, Litam and Lam (2021) found that female counselors exhibited greater empathy and stronger supportive attitudes toward trafficking survivors compared to male counselors, aligning with broader gender differences in social issue perceptions. Related research on the commercial sex industry has found that women are more likely than men to express concern about the potential for exploitation (Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Johansson & Hansen, 2024). While these concerns do not imply a conflation of sex work and trafficking, they suggest that attitudes toward both may be informed by similar structural critiques regarding power and vulnerability.

Collectively, these studies suggest that the gender gaps in trafficking attitudes are rooted in deeper socialization patterns and ideological frameworks rather than solely differences in knowledge or direct experience. Based on these observations, we expect that:

H1: Women will be more likely than men to associate human trafficking with vulnerable groups, perceive it as a more serious issue across types, attribute it to broader systemic causes, and link it to the commercial sex industry.

Given the key role of knowledge in shaping attitudes toward human trafficking, it is important to examine whether gender differences in these attitudes can be attributed to disparities in knowledge levels. Research on gender gaps in political knowledge generally finds that women possess lower levels of knowledge on traditional political items (Burns et al., 2001; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). However, these gaps narrow or disappear when knowledge items are particularly relevant or salient to women (Dolan, 2011; Dolan & Hansen, 2020; Dolan & Kraft, 2023). Given that human trafficking is frequently framed as a gendered issue, especially in relation to sex trafficking and the exploitation of women, women may be more exposed to trafficking-related discussions, reducing potential knowledge disparities (Bonilla & Mo, 2019; Cunningham & Cromer, 2016). Thus, we do not expect to find large gender differences in trafficking knowledge; however, if such gaps do exist, they are likely to be small and insufficient to fully account for gender differences in attitudes. Given that potential gender differences in trafficking knowledge are expected to be small, knowledge alone is unlikely to fully account for gender differences in perceptions of trafficking, leading to our second hypothesis:

H2: While knowledge about human trafficking predicts attitudes, gender differences in perceptions are not explained by differences in knowledge levels.

Methodology

Data

This study draws on a representative sample of original survey data collected from 793 U.S. residents to assess public attitudes toward human trafficking. The survey was administered over the course of the second week of April 2024. Prior to participation, respondents provided informed consent and were given the option to skip questions or discontinue the survey at any point. After accounting for item non-response and incomplete survey submissions, the final analytical sample consisted of 776 individuals. A review of missing data patterns revealed no systematic biases in either item non-response or survey attrition. The sample included adults aged 18 and older, recruited via an online panel through Prolific.¹ Participants were compensated at an average hourly rate of \$13.76, which is nearly twice the federal minimum wage. The median survey completion time was recorded at 7 minutes and 51 seconds. The study was reviewed and approved to ensure compliance with institutional ethical guidelines.

A stratified sampling approach was employed to enhance the representativeness of the sample with respect to key socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, education, and income. The intent was to ensure the sample closely approximated the broader U.S. population. To verify the accuracy of demographic responses, participant-provided information within the survey was cross-checked against previously submitted details maintained by the survey research firm. This comparison showed complete consistency. The firm follows a stringent recruitment protocol, requiring prospective participants to submit multiple forms of identification and verify additional details, such as residential location, before being admitted into the survey panel. This process is designed to uphold data integrity by confirming the eligibility and authenticity of respondents.

One notable discrepancy between the sample and the national population estimates was observed in the distribution of partisanship. When categorizing all individuals who lean toward a party as partisans, the proportion of Democratic identifiers in the sample exceeded that found in the general U.S. population. Given that partisanship could potentially influence attitudes toward human

¹To help ensure data quality, the survey included an attention check as part of the embedded question wording experiment. A total of 98.3% of respondents passed this check, indicating a high level of attentiveness among participants.

trafficking, this imbalance was addressed in all correlational analyses using post-stratification survey weights.² Importantly, the inclusion of weights did not alter the substantive findings.

Design and Dependent Variables

This study employs a combination of descriptive analysis and ordinary least squares (OLS) linear regression to examine public attitudes toward human trafficking. Descriptive statistics provide an overview of key trends and OLS regression assess how socio-demographic characteristics, attitudes, and knowledge about human trafficking predict variation in the dependent variables. OLS regression is used due to the continuous nature of the dependent variables, allowing for a more precise estimation of relationships between predictors and attitudes toward trafficking.³ The decision to use a 0 to 10 scale for measurement is based on the need to maximize variance while ensuring interpretability for respondents. Traditional Likert scales, which often range from 3 to 7 points, may not generate enough variance. This issue arises when responses cluster at extreme values or show limited differentiation across items. Larger, thermometer-style scales offer a more effective alternative by capturing a wider distribution of attitudes without losing clarity, ensuring that responses reflect meaningful differences while allowing for more robust statistical analysis.

Public perceptions of human trafficking are analyzed across three key dimensions: 1) conceptual association, 2) seriousness of trafficking types, and 3) causes of sex trafficking. The first set of dependent variables examines how respondents conceptualize human trafficking by assessing the extent to which they associate it with specific groups or activities. Participants rated their level of association between human trafficking and sex, children, migrants, labor, organ harvesting, debt bondage, and forced marriage. To minimize order effects, these concepts were presented in a randomized order. Responses were recorded on a 0 to 10 scale, with higher values indicating a stronger perceived connection. This approach aligns with prior studies examining how human trafficking is conceptually framed in the public discourse (Bonilla & Mo, 2019; Bouché et al., 2018; Sharapov, 2019), demonstrating that trafficking is frequently associated with the commercial sex industry, foreign women, and child exploitation while neglecting forms such as labor and organ trafficking.

Research further demonstrates that public perceptions of trafficking severity vary based on victim characteristics and media narratives, with child and sex trafficking often viewed as more severe than labor trafficking (Bouché et al., 2018; Digidiki & Baka, 2022; Shafer & Looney, 2018; Tverdova, 2011). The present study builds on this work by assessing how respondents rank multiple forms of trafficking independently. The second set of dependent variables captures perceptions of the seriousness of various forms of human trafficking. Respondents evaluated different trafficking types, including sexual exploitation, child exploitation, migrant smuggling, agricultural labor exploitation, forced marriage, organ harvesting, and debt bondage. These types corresponded to the concepts introduced in the preceding module, though respondents were unable to return to the previous section while completing this portion of the survey. This design choice prevents respondents from revising their prior answers based on new information, ensuring that their initial conceptual associations remain unprompted and independent from their evaluations of severity. To further minimize order effects, the trafficking types were presented in a randomized order. Each form of trafficking was rated on a 0 to 10 scale, where higher values represent greater perceived severity.

While we recognize that migrant smuggling is not, by definition, a form of trafficking, we included it because it is often conflated with human trafficking in media and political rhetoric. Including

²The analyses were conducted using R statistical software 4.4.2. To create and implement the survey weights, the “survey” package was utilized. The data was adjusted by weighting it according to the average percentages of partisanship categories found in large scale, national-level surveys.

³As a robustness check, generalized linear models with a Gamma distribution were estimated to check issues of non-normality in the data, suitable for positive, continuous data that are not normally distributed. The results from this approach were substantively consistent with the findings presented here.

smuggling among the trafficking types allows us to empirically capture this common point of public confusion. Measuring perceptions of migrant smuggling alongside trafficking helps assess how clearly the public distinguishes between the two and reveals how trafficking is constructed in the public imagination.

The third set of dependent variables focuses on beliefs about the underlying causes of sex trafficking. We chose to focus specifically on sex trafficking because it is a widely recognized form of trafficking in public discourse. Sex trafficking often serves as the prototypical image of trafficking in media, advocacy, and policy discussions, which shape how individuals understand its causes compared to other less recognized forms. By isolating sex trafficking, we can better understand the specific beliefs that influence public attribution of responsibility. This focus further allows for the examination of how ideological and demographic factors shape perceptions of trafficking causes within the most salient subtype, including the gendered dimensions that surround them. Prior research has shown that public beliefs about these causes of human trafficking are shaped by structural attributions, personal exposure, and ideological predispositions (Bogdan, 2020; de Vries et al., 2019; Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016; Tverdova, 2011). Building on this work, this study examines how respondents attribute sex trafficking to various economic, institutional, and social factors. Specifically, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they believe sex trafficking results from the following: underground industries, poverty in developing nations, the commercial sex industry, lack of economic opportunity, institutional corruption, gender inequality, and weaknesses in public education systems. To prevent response adjustment based on previous ratings, respondents were not allowed to return to prior sections once they began this module. Additionally, the order of presented causes was randomized to reduce potential ordering effects and ensure that no single factor disproportionately influenced subsequent responses. As with the other measures, responses were recorded on a 0 to 10 scale, with higher values indicating stronger perceived influence.

Independent Variables

While descriptive statistics and bivariate regression tests provide useful insights into public perceptions of human trafficking, they only capture part of the picture. To further examine the factors shaping attitudes toward human trafficking, models were estimated that account for key individual-level predictors. Several predictor variables were included in the empirical analysis based on their established relationships with attitudes on human trafficking and crime-related issues or their frequent use as control measures in attitudinal studies within the U.S. context. Variable coding and descriptive statistics for all independent variables are provided in Appendices A and B.

First, several socio-demographic variables were incorporated into the multiple regression analysis, including age, gender, income, education, and race. As mentioned, a central focus of this study is the role of gender in shaping attitudes toward human trafficking, given prior research suggesting that men and women may differ in how they perceive crime, victimization, and social policy responses. To capture the potential gender differences, gender was coded as a binary variable (0 = man, 1 = woman).⁴ While prior research is mixed on the extent to which socio-demographic factors influence attitudes toward human trafficking, controlling for these variables ensures that any observed gender effects are not driven by other individual characteristics.

The analysis included political ideology and partisan identification as key attitudinal predictors. Political ideology, measured on a left-right scale, was examined to determine whether conservatives are less likely than liberals to attribute trafficking to systemic factors such as poverty, institutional corruption, and gender inequality. Recent research shows that political ideology plays a prominent role in crime-related attitudes (Hansen & Navarro, 2024). Partisan identification was also incorporated, as partisanship increasingly shapes public opinion on social and criminal justice issues (Hansen

⁴Respondents were given the option to select additional gender categories; however, no participants chose an alternative response. Similarly, while additional racial categories were available, the number of respondents in each was insufficient for estimating a nominal-level variable, necessitating a binary coding approach for race.

& Dolan, 2025; Hansen & Navarro, 2025). To preserve statistical power and not overinflate the impact of partisanship, respondents who leaned toward a party were coded as partisans. Republicans may be less likely than Democrats to attribute human trafficking to structural causes such as poverty or gender inequality. However, the relationship between partisanship and trafficking attitudes is uncertain. While trafficking is sometimes framed as a bipartisan issue, partisan leanings may still shape perceptions indirectly through broader ideological views on gender, migration, and labor. Recent debates over social service restrictions, mandatory reporting policies, and the intersection of trafficking with immigration enforcement underscore how the issue has become increasingly politicized in practice, despite appearances of bipartisan agreement.

The analysis includes human trafficking knowledge as a predictor variable to assess whether familiarity with trafficking-related facts influences attitudes. Respondents answered a series of true/false questions about human trafficking, with responses coded as 0 = incorrect and 1 = correct. The questions derive from the United Nations 2025a “Human Trafficking FAQs” and “Human trafficking true or false questions sheet” (2025b). We used this resource because it offers a clear, accessible overview grounded in a widely recognized global framework. Further, it appears among the top search results for individuals seeking information on human trafficking, allowing us to assess public understanding based on commonly encountered material. The knowledge questions covered key misconceptions, including whether only undocumented foreign nationals can be trafficked (*false*), whether a person receiving payment disqualifies them as a trafficking victim (*false*), whether trafficking is defined by exploitation (*true*), whether children account for half of U.S. trafficking victims (*true*), whether labor trafficking is rare (*false*), and whether migrant smuggling qualifies as human trafficking (*false*). The order of the questions was randomized. Factor analysis was conducted to generate a latent human trafficking knowledge measure, capturing overall knowledge across these items. However, this latent measure is necessarily limited, as human trafficking is a complex issue, public knowledge on the topic is often incomplete, and developing a comprehensive battery of knowledge questions presents significant challenges. As a secondary analysis, we examine whether gender differences in attitudes toward human trafficking may be partially explained by differences in knowledge levels, assessing whether knowledge gaps contribute to observed variations in perceptions.

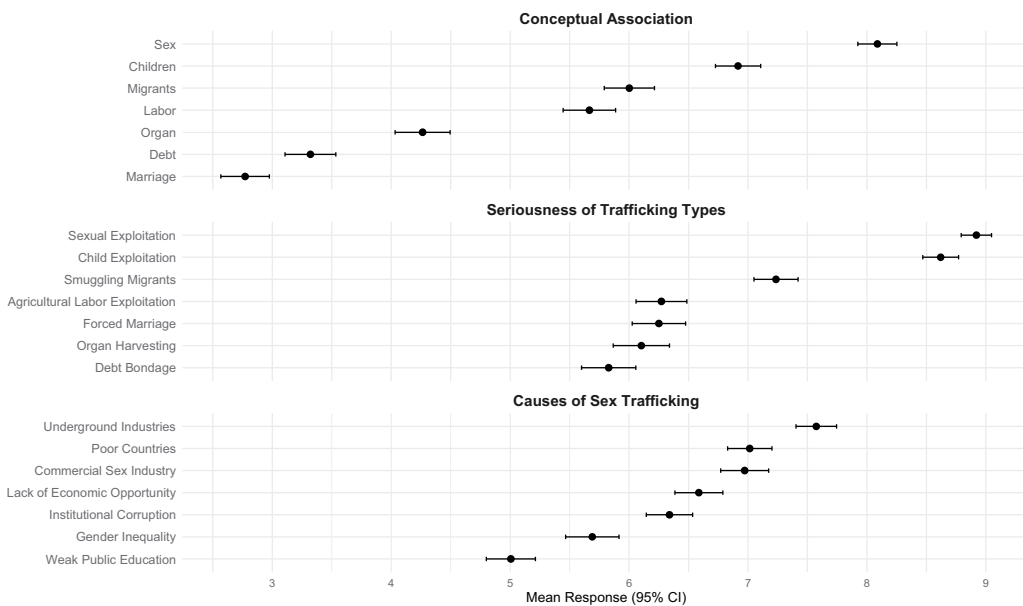


Figure 1. Mean response (95% CI) attitudes and perceptions of human trafficking.

Results

Descriptive Analysis – Attitudes

Figure 1 provides a visual summary of respondents’ attitudes toward human trafficking across conceptual associations, perceived seriousness of trafficking types, and beliefs about its causes. The observed mean values for each measure can be found in Appendix B, Table B1. The results presented in Figure 1 indicate that respondents most strongly associate human trafficking with sex ($M = 8.09$) and with children ($M = 6.92$), which also rates highly, though over a full point lower than sex. Migrants ($M = 6.00$) and labor exploitation ($M = 5.67$) are also viewed as key associations, though at slightly lower levels. Less frequently, respondents link trafficking to organ harvesting ($M = 4.26$), debt bondage ($M = 3.32$), and forced marriage ($M = 2.77$). These findings confirm expectations that respondents would be most likely to conceptualize human trafficking in relation to sex, children, and migrants, as these associations align with dominant media portrayals and public discourse on human trafficking. The relatively lower associations with labor, organ harvesting, debt bondage, and forced marriage suggest that these forms of trafficking may be less visible or less salient in public understanding.

Figure 1 further reveals that respondents perceive sexual exploitation ($M = 8.92$) and child exploitation ($M = 8.62$) as the most serious forms of trafficking. The other types, such as migrant smuggling ($M = 7.24$) and agricultural labor exploitation ($M = 6.27$), are rated as less serious, while forced marriage ($M = 6.25$), organ harvesting ($M = 6.10$), and debt bondage ($M = 5.83$) receive the lowest mean ratings. This pattern aligns with prior research suggesting that the public tends to perceive trafficking involving children or sexual exploitation as more severe forms of trafficking than others. In contrast, less publicly dramatized forms, such as labor exploitation and forced marriage, were rated as less severe, suggesting that perceptions may be influenced more by familiarity, media portrayals, or emotional salience than by the actual conditions of coercion or harm.

The findings for perceived causes of sex trafficking show a more even distribution of responses. Respondents most strongly attribute sex trafficking to underground industries ($M = 7.57$), poverty in developing nations ($M = 7.02$), and the commercial sex industry ($M = 6.97$). Other systemic factors, including institutional corruption ($M = 6.34$), gender inequality ($M = 5.69$), and weak public education

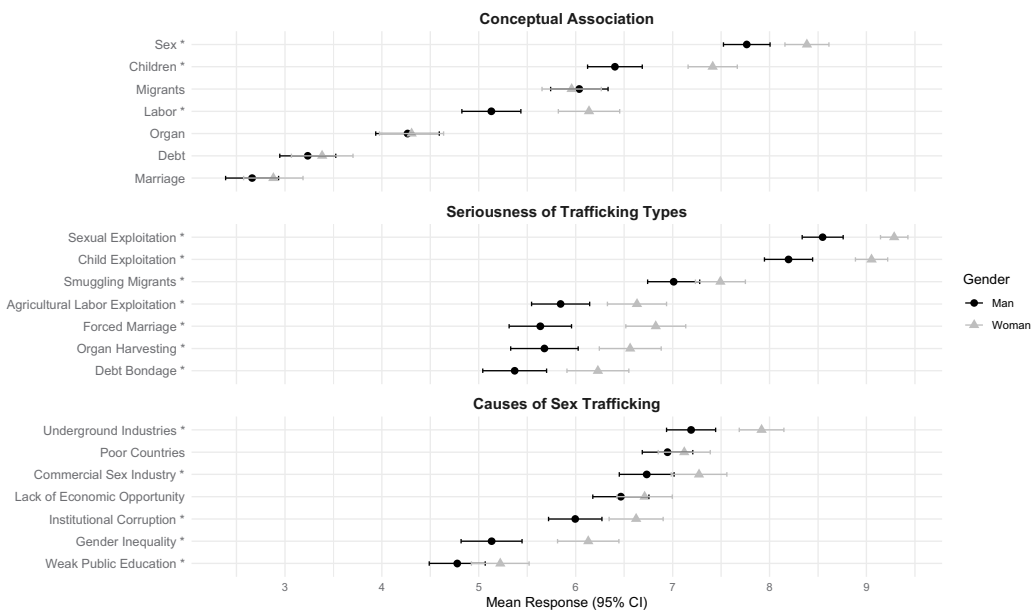


Figure 2. Mean response (95% CI) attitudes and perceptions of human trafficking by gender. * indicates statistically significant gender gaps at $p < .05$.

($M = 5.01$), are also considered contributing causes but receive slightly lower mean ratings. These results indicate that public perceptions of trafficking causes are multidimensional, with respondents recognizing a range of economic, institutional, and social factors rather than a single primary driver.

The results in [Figure 2](#) demonstrate that women are statistically ($p < .05$) more likely than men to associate human trafficking with a wider range vulnerable groups and forms of exploitation. Women associate trafficking most strongly with sex ($M = 8.39$) and children ($M = 7.41$), while men also rate these associations highly but at lower levels ($M = 7.77$ and $M = 6.40$, respectively). Gender differences are also observed in labor exploitation, with women rating it significantly higher ($M = 6.14$) than men ($M = 5.13$). No significant gender gap emerges for migrants (men: $M = 6.04$, women: $M = 5.96$), organs (men: $M = 4.27$, women: $M = 4.31$), debt bondage (men: $M = 3.24$, women: $M = 3.38$), or forced marriage (men: $M = 2.66$, women: $M = 2.88$). These results provide partial support for H_1 , as women are more likely to associate trafficking with children and labor exploitation, but gender differences do not extend to migrants, debt bondage, or forced marriage.

[Figure 2](#) also reveals that women consistently perceive human trafficking as a more serious issue across most forms of exploitation ($p < .05$). The largest gender gaps emerge for sexual exploitation (women: $M = 9.29$, men: $M = 8.55$) and child exploitation (women: $M = 9.05$, men: $M = 8.20$), confirming H_1 's prediction that women would express heightened concern for these forms of trafficking. Women also rate forced marriage (women: $M = 6.83$, men: $M = 5.64$), organ harvesting (women: $M = 6.56$, men: $M = 5.68$), debt bondage (women: $M = 6.23$, men: $M = 5.37$), and agricultural labor exploitation (women: $M = 6.63$, men: $M = 5.84$) as more serious than men. The only type for which no statistically significant gender gap emerges is migrant smuggling, with men and women rating its severity similarly ($M = 7.01$ and $M = 7.49$, respectively). These findings further support H_1 , reinforcing prior research suggesting that women perceive crimes involving victimization, particularly sexual exploitation and child endangerment, as more severe than men.

The results for perceived causes of sex trafficking indicate that women are statistically ($p < .05$) more likely than men to attribute this trafficking form to systemic and structural factors, although the magnitude of gender differences varies. Women most strongly attribute sex trafficking to underground industries ($M = 7.92$), while men also rate this highly but at a lower level ($M = 7.19$). A significant gender gap also emerges for the commercial sex industry (women: $M = 7.27$, men: $M = 6.73$), institutional corruption (women: $M = 6.62$, men: $M = 6.00$), and gender inequality (women: $M = 6.13$, men: $M = 5.13$). However, gender differences are not statistically significant for poverty in developing nations (women: $M = 7.12$, men: $M = 6.95$), lack of economic opportunity (women: $M = 6.71$, men: $M = 6.47$), or weak public education (women: $M = 5.22$, men: $M = 4.78$). These findings suggest that women are more likely than men to view sex trafficking as a problem linked to structural inequalities, particularly those related to gender and corruption.

Regression Analysis – Attitudes

[Table 1](#) presents the results of OLS regression models examining factors that shape conceptual associations with human trafficking. The findings reveal several statistically significant predictors of how individuals associate trafficking with different groups and forms of exploitation. Race is a significant predictor, with White respondents statistically less likely than non-White respondents to associate trafficking with children ($\beta = -0.49$, $p < .05$), migrants ($\beta = -0.66$, $p < .01$), labor ($\beta = -0.52$, $p < .05$), organ harvesting ($\beta = -1.53$, $p < .01$), debt bondage ($\beta = -0.49$, $p < .05$), and forced marriage ($\beta = -0.55$, $p < .05$). These results suggest that non-White respondents may conceptualize trafficking more broadly. Age, education, income, political ideology, and partisanship show minimal influence on trafficking associations, with the only significant effects being education's positive relationship with recognizing forced marriage as trafficking ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < .05$) and age's positive association with linking trafficking to migrants ($\beta = 0.04$, $p < .01$).

Human trafficking knowledge is a strong and consistent predictor across multiple associations, with higher knowledge levels increasing the likelihood of linking trafficking to sex ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < .01$),

Table 1. Regression Models Predicting Conceptual Associations.

	Sex	Children	Migrants	Labor	Organ	Debt	Marriage
Constant	7.91** (0.39)	6.52** (0.45)	5.08** (0.51)	5.56** (0.53)	5.84** (0.55)	3.39** (0.52)	3.20** (0.49)
Age	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.04** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Woman	0.58** (0.17)	1.03** (0.19)	-0.12 (0.21)	0.96** (0.22)	0.08 (0.23)	0.18 (0.22)	0.23 (0.21)
White	0.06 (0.19)	-0.49* (0.22)	-0.66** (0.24)	-0.52* (0.25)	-1.53** (0.26)	-0.49* (0.25)	-0.55* (0.23)
Education	-0.10 (0.07)	-0.10 (0.08)	0.05 (0.09)	0.04 (0.09)	-0.02 (0.10)	0.17 (0.09)	0.18* (0.09)
Income	0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.03)
Political Ideology	-0.34 (0.22)	-0.08 (0.26)	0.45 (0.29)	-0.03 (0.30)	0.48 (0.32)	0.04 (0.30)	0.19 (0.28)
Party ID – Independent	0.13 (0.31)	0.07 (0.36)	0.46 (0.40)	-0.26 (0.42)	0.19 (0.44)	-0.28 (0.42)	-0.57 (0.39)
Party ID – Republican	-0.05 (0.04)	0.07 (0.05)	-0.07 (0.06)	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.06)	0.02 (0.06)	0.01 (0.06)
HT Knowledge	0.44** (0.08)	0.31** (0.10)	0.54** (0.11)	0.29** (0.11)	-0.02 (0.12)	-0.13 (0.11)	-0.27* (0.11)
Observations	776	776	776	775	775	775	775
R ²	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.05	0.05	0.02	0.04
Adjusted R ²	0.06	0.05	0.05	0.04	0.04	0.01	0.03

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; standard errors in parentheses.

children ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < .01$), migrants ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < .01$), and labor ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < .01$). These results indicate that greater factual knowledge about trafficking corresponds with stronger recognition of its connections to commonly discussed groups and industries.

Gender is also a significant predictor of conceptual associations with human trafficking, supporting H_1 . Women are more likely than men to associate human trafficking with sex ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < .01$), children ($\beta = 1.03$, $p < .01$), and labor exploitation ($\beta = 0.96$, $p < .01$). However, gender does not significantly predict associations with migrants, organ harvesting, debt bondage, or forced marriage. This suggests that while women emphasize well-known forms of trafficking, they do not differ from men in associating trafficking with lesser-known or more complex forms of exploitation. Additionally, these gender differences persist even when accounting for human trafficking knowledge, supporting H_2 and suggesting that gendered differences in perceptions are not simply a function of knowledge gaps. These findings reinforce that gender plays a key role in shaping how individuals conceptualize human trafficking, particularly in relation to sexual and labor exploitation.

Table 2 presents the results of OLS regression models predicting perceptions of the seriousness of different forms of human trafficking. Race is a significant predictor, with White respondents less likely than non-White respondents to perceive organ harvesting as a serious form of trafficking ($\beta = -1.15$, $p < .01$), though no racial differences emerge for other trafficking types. Education is negatively associated with the perceived seriousness of sexual exploitation ($\beta = -0.14$, $p < .01$) and child exploitation ($\beta = -0.17$, $p < .01$), suggesting that higher education may correspond with a broader or more nuanced understanding of trafficking beyond its most visible forms. Political ideology shows limited effects, with more conservative individuals perceiving sexual exploitation as less serious ($\beta = -0.35$, $p < .05$) but agricultural labor exploitation as more serious ($\beta = 0.60$, $p < .05$). Human trafficking knowledge predicts the perceived seriousness of numerous trafficking types, with higher knowledge levels associated with increased perceived seriousness of sexual exploitation ($\beta = 0.53$, $p < .01$), child exploitation ($\beta = 0.50$, $p < .01$), migrant smuggling ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < .01$), and agricultural labor exploitation ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < .01$). These findings indicate that greater factual knowledge increases concern for various trafficking types and reinforces the role of awareness in shaping public attitudes.

Table 2. Regression Models Predicting Seriousness of Human Trafficking Types.

	Sexual Exploitation	Child Exploitation	Smuggling Migrants	Agricultural Labor Exploitation	Forced Marriage	Organ Harvesting	Debt Bondage
Constant	9.29** (0.29)	9.42** (0.35)	6.40** (0.44)	6.74** (0.51)	7.68** (0.53)	8.09** (0.56)	6.08** (0.55)
Age	0.01 (0.00)	-0.01* (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Woman	0.68** (0.12)	0.84** (0.15)	0.43* (0.19)	0.69** (0.22)	1.13** (0.22)	0.91** (0.24)	0.81** (0.23)
White	-0.24 (0.14)	-0.26 (0.16)	-0.33 (0.21)	-0.32 (0.24)	-0.44 (0.25)	-1.15** (0.27)	-0.36 (0.26)
Education	-0.14** (0.05)	-0.17** (0.06)	-0.05 (0.08)	0.03 (0.09)	0.01 (0.09)	-0.04 (0.10)	0.13 (0.10)
Income	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.06* (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)
Political Ideology	-0.35* (0.17)	-0.22 (0.20)	-0.17 (0.25)	0.60* (0.29)	-0.44 (0.30)	0.09 (0.32)	-0.03 (0.32)
Party ID – Independent	0.02 (0.23)	0.25 (0.28)	-0.46 (0.35)	-0.11 (0.41)	-0.50 (0.42)	-0.04 (0.45)	-0.40 (0.44)
Party ID – Republican	-0.03 (0.03)	0.02 (0.04)	0.10* (0.05)	-0.16** (0.06)	-0.12 (0.06)	0.02 (0.06)	-0.08 (0.06)
HT Knowledge	0.53** (0.06)	0.50** (0.07)	0.40** (0.09)	0.34** (0.11)	0.18 (0.11)	0.18 (0.12)	0.23 (0.12)
Observations	776	776	776	776	776	776	776
R ²	0.15	0.12	0.06	0.07	0.08	0.07	0.04
Adjusted R ²	0.14	0.11	0.05	0.06	0.07	0.06	0.03

***p* < .01; **p* < .05; standard errors in parentheses.

Table 3. Regression Models Predicting Causes of Sex Trafficking.

	Underground Industries	Poor Countries	Commercial Sex Industry	Lack Economic Opportunity	Institutional Corruption	Gender Inequality	Weak Public Education
Constant	7.50** (0.41)	6.81** (0.44)	5.31** (0.47)	6.30** (0.47)	7.47** (0.47)	6.22** (0.50)	5.45** (0.50)
Age	0.01 (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)	0.04** (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Woman	0.69** (0.17)	0.11 (0.19)	0.60** (0.20)	0.12 (0.20)	0.56** (0.20)	0.85** (0.21)	0.41 (0.21)
White	-0.35 (0.19)	-0.55** (0.21)	-1.16** (0.22)	-0.30 (0.22)	-0.82** (0.22)	-0.32 (0.24)	-0.76** (0.24)
Education	-0.15* (0.07)	-0.15 (0.08)	-0.08 (0.08)	0.10 (0.08)	-0.08 (0.08)	0.12 (0.09)	0.02 (0.09)
Income	0.01 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.06 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)
Political Ideology	-0.10 (0.23)	-0.39 (0.25)	-0.13 (0.27)	0.08 (0.27)	0.01 (0.27)	-0.56 (0.29)	-0.24 (0.28)
Party ID – Independent	-0.20 (0.33)	-0.68 (0.35)	-0.30 (0.38)	-0.06 (0.38)	-0.25 (0.37)	-0.89* (0.40)	-0.65 (0.40)
Party ID – Republican	0.01 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)	0.19** (0.05)	-0.25** (0.05)	-0.11* (0.05)	-0.32** (0.06)	-0.10 (0.06)
HT Knowledge	0.44** (0.09)	0.44** (0.09)	0.16 (0.10)	0.21* (0.10)	0.28** (0.10)	0.10 (0.11)	0.02 (0.11)
Observations	776	776	776	776	776	776	776
R ²	0.07	0.06	0.09	0.08	0.07	0.18	0.05
Adjusted R ²	0.06	0.05	0.08	0.07	0.05	0.17	0.04

***p* < .01; **p* < .05; standard errors in parentheses.

Gender is the most consistent predictor of perceived seriousness, supporting H_1 . Women consistently rate all forms of human trafficking as more serious than men, indicating that they perceive the issue as more severe overall. The largest gender gaps are seen for forced marriage ($\beta = 1.13, p < .01$), organ harvesting ($\beta = 0.91, p < .01$), child exploitation ($\beta = 0.84, p < .01$), and debt bondage ($\beta = 0.81, p < .01$). Women also rate agricultural labor exploitation ($\beta = 0.69, p < .01$), sexual exploitation ($\beta = 0.68, p < .01$), and migrant smuggling ($\beta = 0.43, p < .05$) as more serious than men. Notably, these gender differences persist even when controlling for human trafficking knowledge, supporting H_2 and indicating that women’s heightened concern is not simply a function of greater factual awareness.

Table 3 presents the results of OLS regression models predicting perceptions of the causes of sex trafficking. Race is a significant predictor, with White respondents less likely than non-White respondents to attribute this trafficking forms to poor countries ($\beta = -0.55, p < .05$), the commercial sex industry ($\beta = -1.16, p < .01$), institutional corruption ($\beta = -0.82, p < .01$), and weak public education ($\beta = -0.76, p < .05$). Education is negatively associated with attributing sex trafficking to underground industries ($\beta = -0.15, p < .05$), but no significant effects emerge for other causes. Political ideology shows no impact on attitudes. Republicans are less likely to view sex trafficking as linked to institutional corruption ($\beta = -0.11, p < .05$), gender inequality ($\beta = -0.32, p < .01$), and lack of economic opportunity ($\beta = -0.25, p < .05$). However, Republicans are more likely to blame the commercial sex industry ($\beta = 0.19, p < .01$). Human trafficking knowledge predicts perceptions of several causes, with higher knowledge levels increasing the likelihood of attributing sex trafficking to underground industries ($\beta = 0.44, p < .01$), poor countries ($\beta = 0.44, p < .01$), institutional corruption ($\beta = 0.28, p < .01$), and lack of economic opportunity ($\beta = 0.21, p < .05$). These results suggest that greater factual knowledge strengthens recognition of trafficking’s structural and economic drivers.

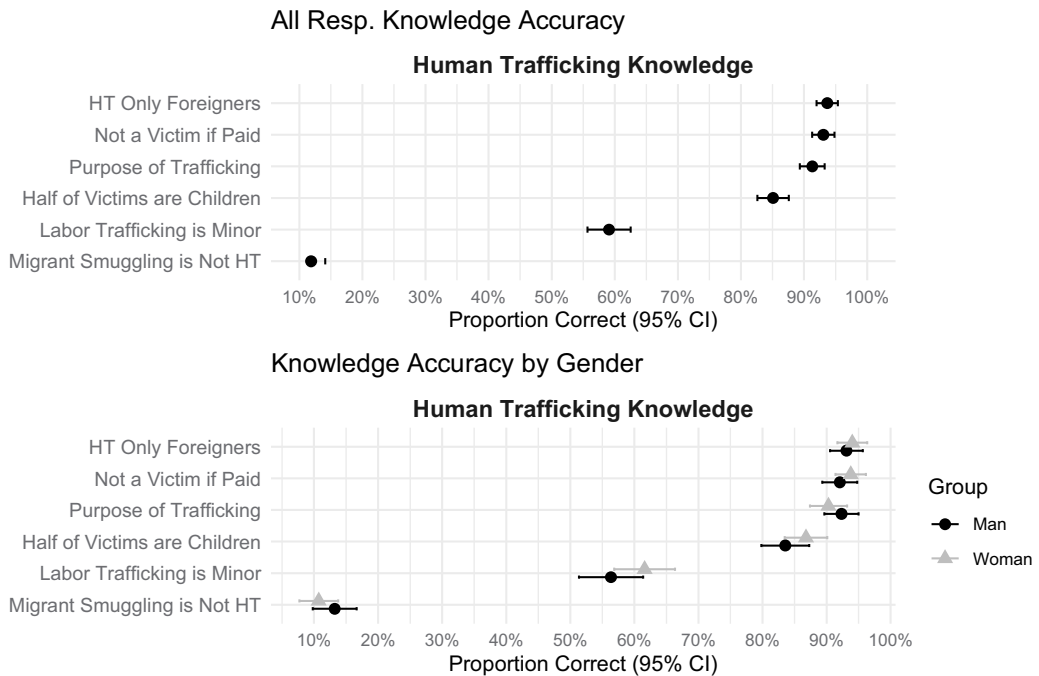


Figure 3. Human trafficking knowledge – percentage correct (95% CI).

Gender is a predictor of many of the perceived causes, supporting H_1 . Women are significantly more likely than men to attribute sex trafficking to underground industries ($\beta = 0.69, p < .01$), the commercial sex industry ($\beta = 0.60, p < .01$), institutional corruption ($\beta = 0.56, p < .01$), and gender inequality ($\beta = 0.85, p < .01$). These findings suggest that women are more likely to attribute trafficking to systemic and structural inequalities, particularly those related to gender and governance. These gender differences also persist even when controlling for human trafficking knowledge, supporting H_2 .

Analysis – Human Trafficking Knowledge

Figure 3 illustrates human trafficking knowledge levels across the full sample (top panel) and by gender (bottom panel) (see, Appendix B, Table B3 for percentages). The top panel shows the percentage of respondents who correctly answered each of the six trafficking knowledge questions, highlighting variation in knowledge across different trafficking-related topics. The bottom panel breaks these results down by gender. The results demonstrate that women and men exhibit similar patterns of correct responses across the six items. Notably, there is no instance where men answer correctly at a statistically higher rate than women. The findings support H_2 . Men and women possess comparable levels of factual knowledge about human trafficking, reinforcing the notion that gendered differences in trafficking perceptions are not simply a reflection of knowledge disparities.

Appendix C, Table C1, provides further insight into gender and human trafficking knowledge, presenting logistic regression models predicting correct responses to each of the six trafficking knowledge items. The results show that, when controlling for all other factors, gender does not significantly predict correctly answering any of the knowledge questions. This result supports the finding from Figure 3 that men and women possess comparable levels of trafficking knowledge. That said, women still rate trafficking as more serious and attribute it to systemic factors at higher rates than men. Even when controlling for knowledge levels, women remain more likely to view trafficking as a severe issue rooted in structural inequalities

Discussion

This study examined how gender shapes public attitudes toward human trafficking, particularly in relation to trafficking knowledge. Given widespread public misconceptions, understanding the factors driving these gendered differences is crucial for designing effective interventions and policies. To date, no study has explicitly analyzed whether gender differences in trafficking attitudes stem from knowledge disparities or systematically examined gender gaps in knowledge about human trafficking.

Our findings indicate that gender significantly shapes public attitudes toward human trafficking, with women being consistently more likely than men to associate trafficking with a wider range of vulnerable populations, perceive trafficking as a more serious issue, and attribute its causes to factors such as gender inequality, exploitation, and systemic abuse. Importantly, these gender differences persist even after accounting for knowledge about human trafficking. This finding suggests that gendered attitudes toward trafficking are deeply rooted in broader socialization, normative beliefs, and ideological orientations.

The pattern we identify aligns with gendered attitudes toward other related social issues like the commercial sex industry, where prior studies have shown that women tend to express more critical views than men regarding the exchange of sex for payment (Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Johansson & Hansen, 2024). Rather than attributing this solely to moral opposition, we interpret these differences as reflecting greater concern with structural inequalities, exploitation, and gendered power imbalances that shape both sex work and trafficking contexts. While we do not intend to conflate sex work and trafficking, we highlight these parallels to show how public attitudes may be informed by similar concerns about vulnerability and systemic harm.

These findings support a theoretical perspective that views gender as a key axis through which framing effects are filtered and interpreted, influencing how individuals respond to complex social issues. This framing dynamic has practical consequences for policy and public engagement. Anti-trafficking campaigns and educational programs must consider that women tend to rate human trafficking as more serious and are more likely to attribute it to structural causes such as gender inequality and institutional corruption, whereas men may not consistently view it in systemic terms. This insight is critical for designing more inclusive interventions and outreach strategies that account for variation in how the public conceptualizes trafficking and who is seen as a legitimate victim. Efforts that explicitly target trafficking myths, such as the misconception that trafficking primarily involves foreign victims or that victims can easily escape, could be particularly effective in reducing victim blaming and fostering broader support for victim-centered interventions. Campaigns should use inclusive messaging that resonates across gendered perspectives, balancing the need to highlight trafficking's structural drivers while also addressing more individualistic explanations in a way that challenges misconceptions rather than reinforce them. By acknowledging and addressing gendered differences in perception, policymakers and educators can design interventions that more effectively shift public attitudes and promote policies that support trafficking survivors. Public engagement strategies that acknowledge the diverse ideological orientations of different audiences, without sacrificing survivor-centered principles, may foster broader consensus in support of anti-trafficking policies. Such efforts are particularly important in a polarized political climate, where shared concern for victims can serve as a unifying force, even if the underlying frameworks for understanding trafficking differ.

Although this study focuses on the U.S., its findings have relevance beyond the national context. Research in other countries shows that gendered patterns in attitudes toward trafficking and victimization are not unique to the U.S (Digidiki & Baka, 2022; Digidiki et al., 2016). Cross-national work also suggests that trafficking knowledge varies by context but can be improved through targeted interventions (Salas & Didier, 2020; Scott et al., 2019; Sharapov, 2019). These findings suggest a need to reevaluate how public education and professional training efforts are shaped globally, especially as the framing of trafficking remains tied to particular cultural assumptions about gender, criminality, and deservingness. These parallels suggest that the study's gendered and knowledge-based insights may inform awareness and policy efforts in other settings.

Future research should continue to refine how public knowledge about human trafficking is measured and understood. In particular, greater effort is needed to develop standardized and validated measures of trafficking knowledge that establish a baseline level of knowledge individuals should possess. These measures should be designed for use across studies and over time to track changes in public understanding and assess the effectiveness of awareness efforts. Additionally, research should examine how gendered perceptions of trafficking evolve with increased awareness and education over time and different contexts, particularly through longitudinal and cross-national studies. Finally, future work should explore how gender intersects with other key factors, such as race, ethnicity, immigration- and socio-economic status, to shape perceptions of trafficking, as these intersecting identities may influence both exposure to trafficking-related information and responses to policy interventions.

Limitations

Although this study provides valuable insights into gender differences in attitudes toward human trafficking, a couple limitations should be acknowledged. First, the findings are based on data collected from a U.S. sample, which may limit their generalizability to other national contexts with different legal frameworks, cultural narratives, forms of trafficking, and public discourse. Second, the study explores conceptual associations and general perceptions rather than complex situational judgments or policy trade-offs, which may offer additional nuance in how attitudes are formed and expressed.

Future studies could build on this work by incorporating cross-national comparisons, experimental vignettes, or longitudinal designs to capture shifts in public opinion over time.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that gender plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions of human trafficking. Women are more likely than men to view trafficking as a systemic issue linked to structural inequalities and to perceive a broader range of forms and consequences as serious. Importantly, these differences persist even when accounting for factual knowledge, suggesting that gendered socialization and ideological framing influence public attitudes independently of information levels. By highlighting the interplay between gender, knowledge, and attitudes, this research underscores the need for inclusive and gender-sensitive public education efforts that challenge trafficking myths and promote structural understandings of exploitation. These findings contribute to a growing body of work advocating for more targeted public engagement strategies to bolster support for anti-trafficking policies and survivor-centered interventions.

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Data Availability Statement

Code and data upon request.

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Appendix A: Variable Coding

Age – continuous, respondent's age

Gender – binary, 0 = man; 1 = woman

Race – binary, White = 1; Other races = 0

Education – continuous, 0 = did not graduate from high school; 1 = high-school graduate/GED; 2 = some college, but no degree (yet); 3 = 2-year college degree; 4 = 4-year college degree; 5 = postgraduate degree; 6 = doctorate

Income – continuous, 0 = Less than \$10,000; 1 = \$10,001 - \$20,000; 2 = \$20,001 - \$30,000; 3 = \$30,001 - \$40,000; 4 = \$40,001 - \$50,000; 5 = \$50,001 - \$60,000; 6 = \$60,001 - \$70,000; 7 = \$70,001 - \$80,000; 8 = \$80,001 - \$90,000; 9 = \$90,001 - \$100,000; 10 = \$10,001 - \$150,000; 11 = greater than \$150,001

Partisan Identification – nominal, Democrat; Independent; Republican; leaners coded as partisans

Political Ideology – continuous 10-point scale, 0 = very liberal to 10 = very conservative

Human Trafficking Attitudes and Perceptions –

Concepts - Courts have had a difficult time defining and recognizing the concept of “human trafficking”. On a scale from 0-10, with 0 representing “not at all”, and 10 representing “to a great degree” indicate your level of association between the concept of “human trafficking” and each of the words below.

Seriousness - On a scale from 0-10, with 0 representing “not an issue at all”, and 10 representing “a very serious issue” indicate your understanding of the current scale of the problem in the world for each of these types of “human trafficking”. Human trafficking for the purposes of _____.

Sex Trafficking - To continue exploring your views on human trafficking we want to ask you about the cause of a specific type of trafficking – sex trafficking. On a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 representing “not at all”, and 10 representing “to a great degree” indicate the level of cause these items have on the existence of sex trafficking.

Human Trafficking Knowledge – multiple-choice questions coded as 0 = incorrect; 1 = correct;

- (1) The purpose of trafficking is the exploitation of an individual. (true)
- (2) A person cannot be considered a victim of human trafficking if they received payment. (false)
- (3) Labor trafficking accounts for only a small fraction of human trafficking incidents. (false)
- (4) Migrant smuggling is not considered a form of human trafficking. (true)
- (5) Only undocumented foreign nationals can be trafficked in the United States. (false)
- (6) Around half of the victims of human trafficking in the U.S. are children. (true)

Appendix B: Descriptive Statistics

Table B1. Descriptive Statistics – Independent Variables.

Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Age	18	39	41.33	83	12.83
Education	0	4	3.49	6	1.35
Income	0	6	6.38	11	3.42
Political Ideology	0	4	3.98	10	2.82
Variable	Dem	Ind	Rep		
Party ID	52.33%	25.10%	22.57%		
Variable	Men	Women			
Gender	48.46%	51.54%			
Variable	White	Non-White			
Race	68.86%	31.15%			

Table B2. Mean Responses – Attitudes and Perceptions of Human Trafficking.

	Man	Woman	All Resp.
Conceptual Association			
Sex	7.77 (2.39)	8.39** (2.32)	8.09 (2.36)
Children	6.40 (2.79)	7.41** (2.60)	6.92 (2.74)
Migrants	6.04 (2.94)	5.96 (3.13)	6.00 (3.03)
Labor	5.13 (3.02)	6.14** (3.24)	5.67 (3.27)
Organ	4.27 (3.26)	4.31 (3.38)	4.26 (3.31)
Debt	3.24 (2.87)	3.38 (3.25)	3.32 (3.07)
Marriage	2.66 (2.71)	2.88 (3.14)	2.77 (2.93)
Seriousness of Trafficking Types			
Sexual exploitation	8.55 (2.10)	9.29** (1.45)	8.92 (1.83)
Child exploitation	8.20 (2.46)	9.05** (1.70)	8.62 (2.16)
Smuggling migrants	7.01 (2.67)	7.49* (2.64)	7.24 (2.67)
Agricultural labor exploitation	5.84 (2.97)	6.63** (3.12)	6.27 (3.06)
Forced marriage	5.64 (3.19)	6.83** (3.16)	6.25 (3.22)
Organ harvesting	5.68 (3.45)	6.56** (3.26)	6.10 (3.39)
Debt bondage	5.37 (3.27)	6.23** (3.26)	5.83 (3.28)
Causes of Sex Trafficking			
Underground industries	7.19 (2.52)	7.92** (2.36)	7.57 (2.46)
Poor countries	6.95 (2.58)	7.12 (2.75)	7.02 (2.68)
Commercial sex industry	6.73 (2.80)	7.27** (2.93)	6.97 (2.89)
Lack of economic opportunity	6.47 (2.87)	6.71 (2.91)	6.59 (2.90)
Institutional corruption	6.00 (2.73)	6.62** (2.85)	6.34 (2.80)
Gender inequality	5.13 (3.12)	6.13** (3.24)	5.69 (3.22)
Weak public education	4.78 (2.86)	5.22* (3.05)	5.01 (2.96)

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; standard deviations in parentheses.

Table B3. Proportion Correct – Human Trafficking Knowledge Questions by Gender.

Question	Men	Women	All Resp
<i>Only undocumented foreign nationals can be trafficked in the United States.</i>	0.93	0.94	0.94
<i>A person cannot be considered a victim of human trafficking if they received payment.</i>	0.92	0.94	0.93
The purpose of trafficking is the exploitation of an individual.	0.92	0.90	0.91
Around half of the victims of human trafficking in the U.S. are children.	0.84	0.87	0.85
<i>Labor trafficking accounts for only a small fraction of human trafficking incidents.</i>	0.56	0.62	0.59
Migrant smuggling is not considered a form of human trafficking.	0.13	0.11	0.12

Italicized = False.

Appendix C: Logistic Regression Models Predicting Human Trafficking Knowledge

Table C1. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Human Trafficking Knowledge.

	HT Only Foreigners	Not A Victim If Paid	Purpose of Human Trafficking	Half of Victims Children	Labor Trafficking Minor	Migrant Smuggling Not HT
Constant	3.73** (0.74)	3.62** (0.74)	3.67** (0.68)	2.04** (0.49)	-0.21 (0.35)	-2.17** (0.53)
Age	-0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Woman	0.08 (0.30)	0.11 (0.29)	-0.31 (0.26)	0.24 (0.21)	0.21 (0.15)	-0.17 (0.22)
White	1.04** (0.32)	0.83** (0.30)	-0.53 (0.31)	-0.16 (0.23)	0.15 (0.16)	-0.59* (0.24)
Education	-0.20 (0.13)	-0.32* (0.13)	-0.32** (0.12)	-0.16 (0.09)	0.14* (0.06)	0.04 (0.09)
Income	0.04 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)	0.05 (0.04)	0.04 (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.04)
Political Ideology	0.11 (0.40)	0.09 (0.42)	-0.21 (0.35)	0.58 (0.31)	0.18 (0.20)	0.29 (0.30)
Party ID – Independent	0.40 (0.49)	-0.58 (0.46)	-0.41 (0.47)	-0.12 (0.37)	0.10 (0.28)	0.53 (0.40)
Party ID – Republican	-0.18* (0.07)	-0.10 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.07)	-0.00 (0.05)	-0.08* (0.04)	0.02 (0.06)
Observations	776	777	778	776	777	777
Log Likelihood	-173.3	-184.6	-223.8	-319.4	-516.6	-278.2
Akaike Inf. Crit.	364.5	387.2	465.5	656.8	1,051.3	574.4

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; standard errors in parentheses.

Appendix D: Impact of Gender on Attitudes and Perceptions of Human Trafficking

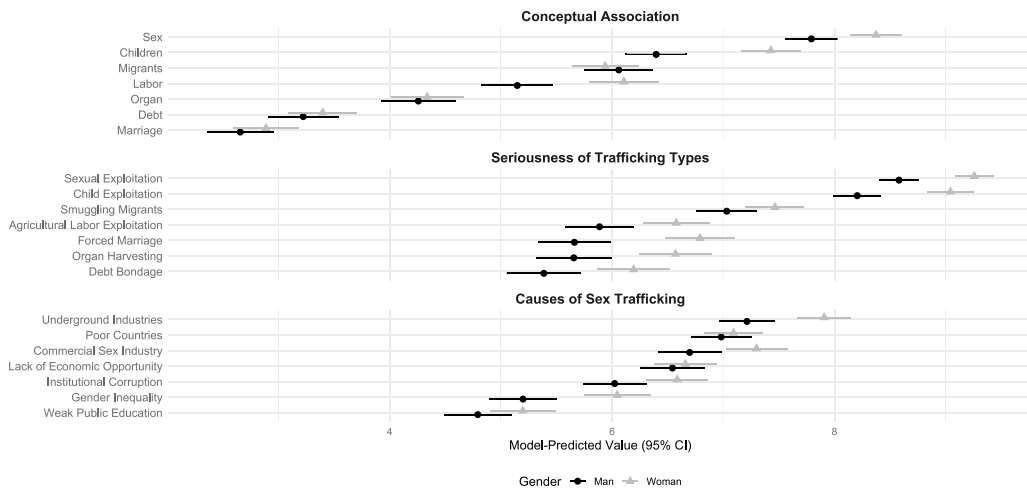


Figure D1. Effects plots of impact of gender on attitudes and perceptions of human Trafficking.