SEX TRAFFICKING AND TRAUMA

Considerable controversy exists over the best term to describe the commercial sex trade. Is the appropriate term *prostitution? Sex work? Sex trafficking?* Advocates and other providers have an understandable desire to reduce the stigma that attaches to words such as *prostitution*. However, the downside to a neutral-sounding term such as *sex work* is the implication that participation in commercial sex is a freely-made choice, when in fact many have been forced into it.

Critics such as Farley (2003) assert that the portrayal of commercial sex as consensual on the part of all parties denies or trivializes its harm to a large number of participants. Farley argues that exploitation by the sex industry is a form of sexual violence which results in economic profit for perpetrators, and that—like slavery—commercial sex is “a lucrative form of oppression of human beings.”

According to Farley, poverty, racism and sexism are inextricably connected in exploitation by the sex industry. Individuals are purchased because they are vulnerable due to lack of educational options, previous physical and emotional harm, and toxic ethnic and racial stereotypes.

*Human trafficking* is best understood as modern-day slavery (Song & Thompson, 2005). Children and adults are trafficked into sweatshops, domestic servitude, commercial sex, farm labor, begging, construction and many other forms of labor. *Sex trafficking* is a subset of human trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age.

For purposes of this document, we will be discussing work in the sex industry that is not freely chosen by the individuals involved, or would not be chosen if they thought they had any other viable options.

Trauma and sex trafficking

Sex trafficking “is rampant in the intersection between violence, addiction and mental health issues,” says Karen Foley, a behavioral health specialist and founder of Triple Play Connections in Seattle. “Sex trafficking is often part of that package” (Foley, 2010).

Many similarities exist between survivors of domestic violence and survivors of sex trafficking:

- The range of tactics used by the perpetrators of trafficking and domestic violence are similar and include: physical and emotional violence; isolation; financial abuse; threats to persons, family and others; withholding of food, sleep and medical care; sexual abuse and...
exploitation; and using children to manipulate and control their victims (Song & Thompson, 2005).

- Quite often, victims of trafficking suffer multiple victimizations that include domestic, intimate partner, or relational violence. Victims of trafficking are raped, kidnapped, beaten, threatened and exploited in extreme and horrific ways (Song & Thompson, 2005).

- Although not all survivors of childhood sexual abuse are recruited into commercial sex, most people being exploited by the sex industry have a history of sexual abuse as children, usually by several people (Farley, 2003).

- One study found that 66 percent of people involved in commercial sex were victims of child sexual abuse. Women who were sexually abused as children are four times more likely than women who haven’t been abused to work in the commercial sex industry, while men who were sexually abused as children are eight times more likely to do so (ICASA, 2001).

- Seventy-five percent of those involved in commercial sex have been homeless at some point in their lives.

- Dissociative disorders, depression and other mood disorders are common among individuals involved in street, escort, and strip club forms of commercial sex, according to Farley (2003). She says most individuals report that they cannot do the work unless they dissociate. Chemical dissociation aids psychological dissociation, and functions as an analgesic for injuries from violence. When individuals being exploited by commercial sex do not dissociate, they are at risk for being overwhelmed with pain, shame and rage.

- The constant verbal humiliation, the social indignity and contempt, and the physical violence of commercial sex exploitation and trafficking can result in personality changes which have been described as complex post-traumatic stress disorder (Herman 1997).

### Barriers to service

One of the biggest barriers to appropriate services is the invisibility of people victimized by sex trafficking and exploited by the sex industry (Farley, 2003). People involved in commercial sex or sex trafficking may face several obstacles:

- Fear drives invisibility. In addition to fear of prosecution for engaging in commercial sex, people victimized by human trafficking or sex trafficking may fear being deported if they have immigrant status and lack documentation. Individuals may fear that disclosure of commercial sex or other illegal activity may trigger an investigation by a child welfare agency. They may fear retaliation from a pimp or from captors if they are a victim of sex trafficking or human trafficking.

- Some people to whom they turn for help may deny that a person engaged in
SAFETY ISSUES: SEX TRAFFICKING

People experiencing sex trafficking and exploitation by the sex industry face a number of safety issues:

• Like many victims of domestic violence, victims of sex trafficking lack access to money, “systems” or people who could help them to escape (Song & Thompson, 2005).

• Individuals victimized in the sex industry may be unaware that they are able to access domestic violence or sexual assault advocacy services after experiencing violence on the job. When they do seek support, they may experience judgment from those who are in a position to respond to the interpersonal violence (Haskell, 2010).

• People exploited by the sex industry are often reluctant to report violence to authorities for fear of prosecution or the belief that their complaints won’t be taken seriously, and in some cases, they may face more violence from the police officers they turn to for help (Haskell, 2010).

• Victims may feel compelled to conceal their occupation from advocates and other providers because of house rules such as curfews. As a result, advocates miss out on opportunities to develop safety plans tailored to the individual’s situation (Haskell, 2010).

• Individuals engaged in commercial sex are often prevented from using condoms or practicing safe sex. Seattle-based behavioral health specialist Karen Foley says:

  “What comes with [commercial sex] are sexually transmitted infections, including HIV and AIDS and hepatitis C, and those messages from partners that no one else will have them. I see that all the time. Also, situations where the perpetrator won’t let her use a condom or other means to protect herself” (Foley, 2010).

If an individual is not ready, or doesn’t feel able, to leave the sex industry at this time, explore safety options that reduce risk. For example, sex workers in some communities act as “lookouts” for each other, or keep a “bad johns” list of customers who are violent (Obtinario, 2010). Explore options that help the individual control the situation, such as choosing the place where encounters take place and having a back-up plan if things go wrong (Obtinario, 2010).
commercial sex can be raped. Other providers may have suggested that the victim asked for rape or other violence, and police may even imply that an individual is merely upset about not getting paid.

- People involved in commercial sex may be barred from services by providers who fear their behavior will be disruptive.

- Some people have experienced other participants in support groups such as A.A. – or even some unscrupulous providers – “coming on” to them once their involvement in the sex industry is revealed.

**Empowering people affected by sex trafficking**

Here are some ways to empower people victimized by sex trafficking or exploitation by the sex industry:

- As with victims of domestic violence and other forms of trauma, the first goal with people seeking to leave the sex industry is to establish physical safety. Only after that has occurred (often by providing safe housing), can other issues such as substance dependence and complex trauma be addressed (Farley, 2003).

- Farley (2003) stresses the need for intake inquiry regarding a history of exploitation by the sex industry. Unless advocates ask screening questions, she says, this type of victimization will remain invisible. Questions she suggests include: “Have you ever exchanged sex for money or clothes, food, housing or drugs?” and “Have you ever worked in the commercial sex industry: for example, dancing, escort, massage, prostitution, pornography or phone sex?”

- Avoid judgmental attitudes. Recognize that the individual may have originally been coerced into the sex industry and that participation is not always the person’s choice. In commercial sex, the conditions which make genuine consent possible are often absent: physical safety, equal power with customers, and real alternatives (Farley, 2003). Understand that some people – even if they weren’t technically coerced – experience commercial sex as a means of survival (Haskell, 2010).

- Include outreach services that meet individuals where they are. Erin Patterson-Sexson, Lead Advocate/Direct Services Coordinator at S.T.A.R. in Anchorage, AK, says:

  “We work right above a free HIV/AIDS testing clinic, and I know we get a lot of folks who will come up and pop in, seeking services, who we know are being sent to the HIV/AIDS testing clinic by their pimps. And if women have a moment without an eye being on them, they are sneaking up to our office and getting some information” (Patterson-Sexson, 2010).
• Respect autonomy. Use a person-centered, harm reduction approach, focusing only on those issues where an individual has indicated a desire for support (Haskell, 2010).

**Working with other providers**

When working with other providers:

• Educate about trauma. Educate police and others in the criminal justice system, as well as other social service providers, about the trauma issues that can lead to exploitation by the sex industry as well as trauma issues stemming from it, and encourage others to take the survivor’s issues seriously.

• Refer to appropriate legal assistance. Victims of trafficking may be entitled to assistance under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA), amended in 2003 by the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act. The TVPA provides critical protections survivors need to assist in the investigation and prosecution of their traffickers and may also provide immigration protections if the victim of trafficking is from outside the U.S. (Song & Thompson, 2005).

**References**


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Herman, J.L. (1997). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York: Basic Books.


