Assisting Victims of Human Trafficking: Strategies to Facilitate Identification, Exit from Trafficking, and the Restoration of Wellness

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Human trafficking is a pressing social justice concern. Social work is uniquely situated to address this problem. However, despite the profession’s commitment to social justice, the scholarship to equip social workers to address this issue has been largely absent from professional discourse. To address this gap, this article helps social work practitioners to assist victims of human trafficking. After orienting readers to the scope and process of human trafficking, the topics of victim identification, exit from trafficking, and the restoration of psychological wellness are discussed. By equipping themselves in these three areas, practitioners can advance social justice on behalf of some of the most exploited people in the world.

**KEY WORDS:** human trafficking; labor trafficking; sex trafficking; slavery; social justice

Human trafficking is the trade of human beings for the purposes of exploitation, typically in the form of commercial sexual exploitation or forced labor (Androff, 2010). Traffickers frequently prey on the most vulnerable people in some of the poorest nations in the world. Once recruited by deceptive means, these individuals are then transported to destination countries, such as the United States, where they are compelled to serve the interests of traffickers through the application of physical and psychological coercion.

As President Obama (2012) recently noted, human trafficking has emerged as one of the primary injustices facing contemporary society. Indeed, due to the coercive, exploitive nature of trafficking, the practice has been referred to as “modern slavery” by the President (Obama, 2012), the Secretary-General of the United Nations (Ki-moon, 2012), and many others (Androff, 2010; Annan, 1999; Bales, 2012; Cole, 2009; Kara, 2009; Logan, Walker, & Hunt, 2009). However, despite the social work profession’s commitment to social justice, comparatively little attention has been devoted to this subject in social work discourse (Alvarez & Alesi, 2012).

The paucity of attention given to the issue of human trafficking is particularly concerning in light of the potential role that social workers can play in assisting victims or survivors of human trafficking. Indeed, the U.S. Department of State (2012) has singled out the social work profession by name, noting the critical role that social workers can play in addressing this problem. However, scholarship designed to equip social workers to address what the United Nations (UN News Center, 2009) referred to as the “epidemic” of trafficking has been largely absent from professional discourse (Alvarez & Alesi, 2012).

Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to help social work practitioners assist victims of human trafficking. This article reviews the scope and process of human trafficking internationally and in the United States and discusses the implications for social workers. Specifically, methods are reviewed through which practitioners can identify victims of trafficking, facilitate their exit from contemporary slavery, and assist them in the restoration of psychological wellness. The article concludes by briefly suggesting avenues for future research.

**HUMAN TRAFFICKING: AN INTERNATIONAL PHENOMENON**

Human trafficking is a complex phenomenon that has recently emerged as an international issue of concern. The first legally binding global attempt to deal with this problem was the United Nations’ (2000) Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children—sometimes referred to as the Palermo protocol or agreement. The protocol went into effect on December 25, 2003.

The Palermo protocol criminalized trafficking and provided the first internationally agreed-upon definition of trafficking in persons. According to the protocol, human trafficking comprises three elements: act, means, and purpose (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2012). More specifically, human trafficking is defined in the protocol (United Nations, 2000) as the act of recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. [italics added] (p. 2, Art. 3a)

The 21st century is characterized by the emergence of human trafficking as a widespread crime (UNODC, 2012). Estimates of the number of people trafficked vary substantially, depending in part on how trafficking is defined. Another factor that complicates estimation is the illegal nature of the activity (Androff, 2010). Traffickers use numerous strategies to ensure that their activities remain hidden, including involving victims in criminal activities during various phases of the trafficking process.

Among the more accurate estimates may be those provided by the United Nation’s International Labour Office (ILO). According to this organization, the minimum number of people trafficked at any given point in time worldwide is approximately 2.5 million (Belser, 2005). More recent analysis suggests that this figure undercounts victims (UNODC, 2012). Creditable estimates of the number of people trafficked globally reach as high as 27 million (Bales, 2012).

Among identified victims worldwide, 55 percent to 60 percent are women, and approximately 75 percent are women and girls (UNODC, 2012). Trafficking for sexual exploitation accounts for 58 percent of all cases detected globally, while forced labor accounts for 36 percent of cases. Other forms of trafficking (for example, forced begging, child soldiers) account for the remaining 6 percent.

The factors underlying the recent growth in trafficking are multifaceted and rooted in globalization (Dominelli, 2010). It is possible to classify countries as primarily origination, transit, and destination nations. An intertwined set of what are commonly called “push and pull” factors creates an emotional milieu that is conducive to trafficking. Push factors exist in nations where trafficking tends to originate (Bales, 2012). Such factors include poverty, political instability, gender-based violence, and other structural dynamics that encourage people to seek alternatives in other nations. Pull factors emanate from destination nations (Vijeyarasa, 2012). These factors include media–propagated images of wealth and prosperity in Western nations, perceived opportunities for gainful employment, and other imagined benefits offered by destination countries.

This milieu of push and pull factors is exploited by traffickers to recruit victims (UNODC, 2012). Transnational criminal syndicates typically prey on the most vulnerable members of society, including people who are female (Siskin & Wyler, 2013), young (Reid, 2012), poor (Kelly, 2004), orphaned (Hughes, 2004), illiterate (Aghatise, 2004), innumerate (Beyrer, 2001), physically disabled (U.S. Department of State, 2012), socially isolated (Okonofua, Ogbomwan, Alutu, Kufre, & Eghosa, 2004), victims of prior sexual abuse (Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Grace, 2009), members of minority groups (Gjermeni et al., 2008), and refugees fleeing wars or natural disasters (UNODC, 2012). Such individuals are easier to recruit, control, and exploit.

A variety of methods are used to recruit victims (Siskin & Wyler, 2013). Deceptive promises include employment, modeling opportunities, study abroad programs, participation in beauty contests, and marriage services. These recruitment methods are often closely integrated with legal businesses (for example, tourism, agriculture, hotel and airline operations, and leisure and entertainment businesses). The intertwined nature of legitimate and illicit practices also complicates efforts to detect trafficking.

In many originating nations, police and government officials are disinclined to investigate possible instances of trafficking (Shelley, 2007). Trafficking
tends to flourish in nations that are characterized by high levels of corruption (Logan et al., 2009). In some nations, government officials collude with traffickers; in others, criminal syndicates bribe local officials to overlook trafficking.

Trafficking is extremely lucrative. According to the ILO, a conservative estimate of profits is $31.6 billion annually (Belser, 2005). These profits are derived using the conservative estimate of 2.5 million victims. After drug and arms trafficking, human trafficking may be the most profitable business for organized crime syndicates (UN Regional Information Centre for Western Europe, 2012). In addition, traffickers face negligible risk. The chances of prosecution are minimal (Shelley, 2007), and the odds of conviction are low (UNODC, 2012). This high-reward/low-risk combination helps fuel the trafficking of individuals from originating nations to destination countries.

UNITED STATES: A DESTINATION NATION

One of the primary destination nations is the United States (Reid, 2012). Indeed, the United States provides one of the largest “markets” for trafficked people in the world (Dovydaïtis, 2010). According to some estimates, the United States receives the second largest number of international sex trafficking victims globally (Reid, 2012). These estimates are congruent with federal data. Among suspected incidents investigated by the federal government, 82 percent were classified as sex trafficking (Banks & Kyckelhahn, 2011).

The U.S. government estimates that thousands of individuals are trafficked into the United States each year, although the illicit nature of trafficking inhibits governmental efforts to obtain a precise numerical total (Clawson et al., 2009). Consequently, as the Congressional Research Service notes, estimates vary (Siskin & Wyler, 2013). On the low end, the U.S. Department of Justice estimates that 14,500 to 17,500 people are trafficked into the United States each year. At the other end of the continuum, the Central Intelligence Agency estimates that 45,000 to 50,000 women and children are trafficked into the United States annually (Siskin & Wyler, 2013).

Traffickers use numerous methods to import people into the United States. For example, victims from Latin American nations are smuggled across the U.S.–Mexican border (Clawson, Layne, & Small, 2006). Visas obtained under false pretenses are used to obtain legal entry from Europe and other areas (Kara, 2009). Asian criminal networks pay American soldiers to engage in sham marriages to import women (Hughes, Chon, & Ellerman, 2007).

Due to the deceptive recruitment strategies used by traffickers, victims often cooperate with traffickers during the transit phase (Zimmerman, Hossain, & Watts, 2011). During this phase, traffickers may deliberately involve victims in illegal activities to keep them from seeking assistance after exploitation begins to occur. Individuals often do not realize they are victims of trafficking until they are exploited in the commercial sex industry or other forms of coerced labor.

Various mechanisms are used to control victims upon their arrival in destination nations (Kara, 2009). A review of prosecuted cases in the United States revealed the frequent use of beatings, rape, and even murder (Roby, Turley, & Cloward, 2008). In addition to the use of physical force, psychological techniques are used to increase victims’ sense of isolation and dependence on traffickers (Hodge & Lietz, 2007). For example, passports and other forms of identification may be taken, communication restricted, family members threatened, and physical confinement imposed (Zimmerman et al., 2011). Individuals may be forced to engage in humiliating sexual acts or use illicit substances and then threatened with exposure to the police, family members, or children (Hom & Woods, 2013). The goal is to break victims psychologically so that they become subservient to the desires of traffickers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

The problem of human trafficking has a number of implications for the social work profession, particularly in regard to assisting victims. Law enforcement, medical professionals, and social workers play instrumental roles in this area (U.S. Department of State, 2012). A direct role exists for social workers in the areas of identification, exit from trafficking, and restoration (Cole, 2009).

Identification

The identification of trafficking victims is an essential first step in the process of healing and restoration of wellness. Many victims are not identified (Okech, Morreau, & Benson, 2011). As a result, they are never afforded the opportunity to access services and escape from traffickers. Although law enforcement is often the primary actor in the
identification process, social workers can play an important role in identifying victims (Clawson et al., 2009). Indeed, some research suggests that 28 percent of trafficked women visited a health professional while being trafficked (Dovydaitis, 2010).

Social workers in direct practice can play a crucial role in identifying victims in settings such as hospital emergency rooms, health clinics, and shelters (Alvarez & Alessi, 2012). The health consequences of trafficking are frequently substantial (Zimmerman et al., 2003). These consequences extend beyond the physical abuse imposed by traffickers to maintain control (for example, beatings, rape). Victims may be forced to perform multiple sex acts with 10 to 20 customers on a daily basis, work long hours in unsafe environments, and live in squalid conditions with minimal nutritional sustenance (Zimmerman et al., 2011). As traffickers seek to maximize their profits, victims can develop health problems, which can bring them into contact with social workers.

Although there is no specific set of physical or emotional symptoms that serves to demarcate victims, some characteristics or indicators suggest the presence of trafficking (Alvarez & Alessi, 2012). These indicators can be classified into three categories: situational, story, and demeanor (Logan et al., 2009). Situational indicators refer to contextual markers that are commonly found among victims of trafficking. Included among these are the absence of documentation (or documentation held by another person), the constant presence of another individual (a pimp, for example), signs of physical abuse (scars, cigarette burns, HIV/AIDS, damage to vagina or anus, complications from forced or unsafe abortions, and so forth), a large number of people living together in a private residence, and frequent changes of address or physical location.

Story indicators refer to elements of a person’s narrative that suggest the presence of trafficking. Story indicators can help practitioners distinguish between trafficking and a difficult employment situation. For example, indications that the individual is being controlled, does not have the freedom to move or change employment, or is forced to provide sex may denote the existence of trafficking (Macy & Graham, 2012).

An individual’s emotional demeanor can also be an important indicator of trafficking. Examples of this include signs of fear or depression or a tendency to answer questions evasively (Logan et al., 2009). If preliminary observation indicates the presence of common situational, story, and emotional indicators, additional exploration of an individual’s story and emotional demeanor may be warranted.

Exploring potential victims’ stories and emotional demeanor is often a complex and difficult process (Pearce, 2011). The use of indirect phrasing can be helpful in exploring emotionally volatile areas (for example, “I was wondering if you could tell me about . . .” or “I would be interested in hearing about . . .”). Interactions with potential victims should be conducted in isolation so as to mitigate the influence of potential traffickers. Interpreters who accompany potential victims should typically be avoided, because they may be operating on behalf of traffickers. Ideally, interpreters who have experience in dealing with victims should be used.

Macy and Graham (2012) provided an extensive review of the literature on identification strategies in the area of sex trafficking. They delineate specific indicators, response strategies, and relevant information for youths and children. They also provide a list of screening questions that explore issues related to safety, employment, living arrangements, travel and immigration, and specific questions for youths and children. Although the article focuses on sex trafficking, much of the content can be used to identify victims of other types of trafficking, so as to facilitate their ability to exit trafficking.

Exit from Trafficking

The U.S. government has instituted a number of policies to help people exit trafficking (Okech et al., 2011). In 2000, the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (P.L. 106-386) was passed. This act created a new visa category, known as T status or T-visa, for individuals who are victims of severe forms of trafficking (Siskin & Wyler, 2013). In exchange for cooperating with law enforcement officials to prosecute traffickers, these visas provide victims with eligibility to reside in the United States legally and access to various health and mental health services.

Despite the availability of such options for rescuing trafficking victims, it is often a difficult process (Hom & Woods, 2013). Many victims do not want to escape. They may fear reprisals against themselves, their children, or their family members in their nation of origin (Hodge & Lietz, 2007). Alternatively, victims may identify with their exploiters.
in a manner akin to battered person or Stockholm syndrome (Rand, 2009). Victims may believe that traffickers care for them and have their best interests at heart.

Consequently, it is crucial to develop a trusting relationship (Pearce, 2011). As alluded to previously, government officials collude with traffickers in some countries of origin (Bales, 2012). Individuals who attempt to escape from traffickers by turning to law enforcement in their native countries may find that police return them to traffickers, at which point they encounter severe repercussions for attempting to escape (U.S. Department of State, 2012). Victims must trust practitioners enough to risk these real and imagined reprisals from law enforcement and traffickers to move forward with the process of exiting trafficking.

Toward that end, practitioners need to ensure that potential victims are aware of the confidentiality policies that guide professional conduct (Macy & Graham, 2012). Practitioners can help engender trust by exhibiting cultural competency (Sigmon, 2008). Victims may not be fluent in or understand English, be familiar with American customs, or understand U.S. legal options. Their knowledge of U.S. society is often filtered through a lens controlled by traffickers, who deliberately provide victims with self-serving views of American society to maintain control (Roby et al., 2008).

Practitioners should be familiar with the relevant legal statutes and available resources so that they can knowledgably and sensitively explain the options that exist for exiting trafficking (Logan et al., 2009). Victims are likely to be unaware of the array of options that are available to them (Clawson et al., 2009). By highlighting services that address victims’ felt needs, practitioners can also be helpful in encouraging their escape (Macy & Graham, 2012).

For victims, the decision to break with traffickers is often fraught with numerous risks, some of which may be imagined and some of which are quite real. In certain cases, victims have attempted to escape from traffickers only to find that health care professionals discounted their accounts at the hands of traffickers (Pearce, 2011). By communicating acceptance, understanding, and genuine concern, social workers can encourage victims who decide to take on the risks associated with seeking a new life apart from traffickers (Kalergis, 2009). A social worker who is willing to serve as a caring advocate and who has the victims’ interests at heart can be instrumental in their decision to seek an alternative life (Aron, Zweig, & Newmark, 2006).

**Restoration**

Restoration of wellness is usually a long and complex journey. Initially, the victims’ immediate needs for safety, shelter, and medical care must be addressed (Clawson et al., 2009). Social workers can conduct a needs assessment to identify victims’ physical, emotional, and spiritual needs (Hom & Woods, 2013). Survivors often have pressing needs for medical treatment given that traffickers tend to neglect routine medical care to avoid detection and to maximize victims’ working time to obtain as much profit as possible. The victims’ needs for health care and safety for their children and family members are typically prioritized during the first stages of the recovery process (Busch-Armendariz, Nsonwu, & Heffron, 2011).

Although the physical health consequences of trafficking are substantial, the mental health needs are likely to be even more profound due to the intense psychological damage inflicted by traffickers on victims who are often extremely vulnerable (Zimmerman et al., 2011). Indeed, the U.S. Department of State (2012) has highlighted the critical role that medical personnel, psychologists, and social workers can play in helping survivors move toward psychological wellness.

As the U.S. Department of State (2012) notes, the restoration of psychological wellness is critical. If the psychological wounds inflicted by traffickers are left unaddressed, then the likelihood of revictimization increases substantially. Victims must work through the psychological challenges to avoid becoming ensnared by traffickers again and to move toward a productive life.

A number of scholars have delineated the mental health challenges engendered by trafficking (Clawson et al., 2009; Gajic-Veljanoski, & Stewart, 2007; Yakushko, 2009; Zimmerman et al., 2011). Survivors tend to have elevated levels of depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance use and abuse, hostility, self-harm, suicidal ideation, and suicide. Other traits that manifest among survivors include memory loss, dissociation, insomnia, guilt, shame, mistrust of others, social withdrawal, loneliness, loss of self-esteem, a sense of apathy or resignation, extreme forms of submissiveness to authority, and loss of personal initiative and autonomy.
To help survivors work through these often intertwined challenges, practitioners’ approaches should be rooted in empathy (Yakushko, 2009). Initially, survivors’ narratives may appear unfocused, contradictory, and minimalistic (Pearce, 2011). Accounts may become more detailed as survivors’ sense of safety increases. Practitioners who exhibit a nonjudgmental attitude, consistently following through on commitments, and practice basic skills such as empathy and validation create a safe therapeutic space, which in turn allows survivors to face and share experiences in more detail.

In charting a course to enhanced wellness, practitioners should use victim-centered approaches that place survivors’ felt needs at the center of the therapeutic process (Hom & Woods, 2013). The acknowledgment of survivors as experts in the restoration process communicates important therapeutic messages (Kalergis, 2009). Such approaches validate survivors’ experiences, foster a sense of control and autonomy, promote trust and safety, and engage clients in the healing process.

The use of client-centered approaches helps to ensure the cultural congruence of counseling. Some survivors from outside the United States may find Western “talk therapy” methods to be incongruent with their value system (Aron et al., 2006). For instance, some clients may prefer alternative therapies to address their emotional needs. Practitioners can communicate openness to such options and network with traditional healers and clergy from the clients’ cultures of origin to provide holistic services.

Given the trauma associated with trafficking, trauma therapy training, particularly with sexual and interpersonal trauma, is also helpful for social worker (Yakushko, 2009). The efficacy of a number of interventions in the amelioration of trauma has been tested. Among the more effective modalities is cognitive–behavioral therapy (CBT) (Clawson et al., 2009). Although the effectiveness of CBT has yet to be assessed with trafficking survivors, its demonstrated effectiveness with a number of other populations suggests that it may be effective with survivors. This modality can be readily adapted to incorporate clients’ cultural beliefs and values while retaining, or even possibly enhancing, its efficacy (Hoo et al., 2010).

Macy and Johns’ (2011) review of the literature on aftermath services for sex trafficking provides more information about this process. Potucky (2010) used a pre-experimental retrospective design to assess the effectiveness of one aftercare program, and Aron, Zweig, and Newmark (2006) relate survivors’ perspectives on such programs. Drawing from psychoanalytic theory, Bennett-Murphy (2012) presented a clinical case featuring a child survivor. Similarly, Koleva (2011) illustrated how psychodrama can be used to meet the therapeutic needs of adult female survivors.

**AVENUES FOR RESEARCH**

The United Nations has noted the need for more comprehensive, evidence–based information on human trafficking (UNODC, 2012) and “pleaded” for social scientists to address this issue (UNODC, 2009). Under the Obama (2012) administration, governmental efforts to ameliorate trafficking have increased. To help dismantle trafficking networks, a record number of traffickers have been charged. Concurrently, the administration has suggested that additional research is needed on service provision for victims of trafficking.

As experts in service provision, social workers are ideally positioned to address this need by evaluating the outcomes and effectiveness of various programs and interventions. Qualitative research might also be conducted that sheds light on the process of victim identification, exiting trafficking, and the restoration of wellness. Research on these topics is needed that distinguishes effects by type of trafficking and gender. For example, much of the existing literature has focused on the needs of female victims of sex trafficking, which is understandable given that this type represents the preponderance of trafficking in the United States (Alvarez & Alessi, 2012). Males, however, are also victims of trafficking. Furthermore, they may find it harder to disclose information about abuse, particularly sexual exploitation (Pearce, 2011). If the trauma is unaddressed, such individuals are at risk of revictimization.

Research to develop effective services for victims should incorporate survivors’ perspectives. Currently, survivors’ perspectives are largely absent from the peer-reviewed literature (Flynn, Alston, & Mason, 2014; Kotrla, 2010; Roby et al., 2008). This is likely due to the hidden nature of the population. Sampling victims is often difficult and fraught with ethical challenges (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2010).
Social workers are perhaps ideally situated to address these challenges and give voice to victims. Soliciting the perspective of clients is an important social work value (NASW, 2008). Multiple theoretical paradigms emphasize the importance of incorporating the voice of oppressed groups into advocacy, education, and practice (Gentlewarrior, Martin-Jearld, Skok, & Sweetser, 2008). Interventions that incorporate clients’ perspectives are more likely to be adopted, implemented, and effective (Sue & Sue, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Trafficking is one of the most egregious violations of human rights (Bales, 2012). Human beings are not commodities that should be bought, sold, and exploited. Rather, as noted in the NASW (2008) Code of Ethics, each person is imbued with inherent dignity and worth and should be treated in a manner that reflects this unique status.

As Androff (2010) noted, trafficking presents a human rights challenge to the social work profession. To help meet this challenge, this article has discussed ways in which social workers can identify trafficking victims, facilitate their exit from contemporary slavery, and assist them in the restoration of psychological wellness. Put differently, this article helps equip social workers to advance social justice on behalf of some of the most exploited people in the world. 

REFERENCES


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