



Mental Health and Human Sex Trafficking Among Youth in the US : A Focus on FBOs and Spiritual Health Recovery

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Introduction

Victims of human trafficking endure physical and mental anguish. Young children and women can suffer from physical violence during laborious work, or client and owner encounters. Owners of victims are also abusive and manipulative in order to force compliance. They can also suffer from mental illnesses as a result of long term abuse. According to Zimmerman [1], "Labor trafficking, including both forced and bonded labor is by far the largest category of human trafficking" [2,3]. Zimmerman states that, "The State Department Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (2009) estimates that just 1.39 million individuals out of the 12.3 million persons enslaved worldwide are trafficked into the commercial sex industry" (p. 568). Children caught up in this crime should not be classified as juvenile delinquents as they are clearly victims. Boxill [4] explains that, "American children who have been prostituted describes these children primarily as juvenile delinquents" (p. 138). These children should not be considered juvenile delinquents and provided with appropriate health care to become productive citizens. Women and children should be cared for as victims and receive the appropriate mental health treatment from government and community entities.

In the event that victims escape human trafficking, they are in need of assistance to regain a level of normalcy in life related to safety and recovery from physical and mental health issues. Reintegrating into society means overcoming the mental health barriers such as trust in relationships that victims will need when working with healthcare professionals during their recovery. Victims need to feel safe in new environments and know that there are those people in society that care about their well-being. The US Department of State (no.year.), asserts that, "Safe guards should be put in place to ensure the security of victims as well as of their family members who may be at risk of intimidation or retaliation from traffickers. In cases in which trafficking victims, either adults or children, have records for crimes committed as a result of being subjected to trafficking, such records should be vacated or expunged" [3]. It is the societal responsibility of law enforcement and political figures to support youth who have been victims of sex trafficking by never classifying them as criminals. Ministers and community leaders should also be advocates of the victim's recovery, and mental health, in order to be productive citizens. According to Theocharous [5], "people often ask me, how does biblical scholarship match with ministry to trafficked

women? And my response is that it is precisely biblically-based doctrine that social ministry and, conversely, social ministry is where biblical doctrines come to life." (p. 309).

Research reveals that children who run away from home for whatever reason, become targets of this crime. Parents need to train their children about how traffickers might approach and appeal to them and explain what their motives. According to Chapple & Crawford [6], "the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, states that commercial sex exploitation is a sex act induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age"(p.723). Children who have been forced to engage in labor such as prostitution, survival of sex for basic needs like food, should be considered victims of commercial child sex exploitation.

Mental Health of Victims

It is beneficial for parental conversations with youth to start at home and extend into the classroom and into faith based and community based organizations. Parents have the unique position and influence to educate their children about evil criminal activity and strategies used by criminal minds. Mental health starts in the mind of having the right thought process starting with human value, dignity, and respect for self and others. Youth people should be educated on how to detect when someone is trying to manipulate and extract them from their families. It is the obligation of parents to take the time to show love, honor, and respect inside the home. This is where we lose our youth, when they do not feel loved in their own home, and possibly run away, right into the hands of a predator. Christian homes and communities have a social responsibility to teach young people and women the importance of protecting the "mind" against drug and alcohol abuse. According to Chapple & Crawford [6], "Sexually exploited youth often suffer from co-occurring conditions ranging from mood disorders, like anxiety and depression, to mental illnesses, such as psychoticism, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder, which may make successful treatment more challenging" (p. 724). Public health implications indicate the most vulnerable populations are that youth with dysfunctional family history. According to Reid [7], "Maltreated youths are, disadvantaged because of harmful family conditions, and are more susceptible to further victimization and exploitation in human trafficking" (p. 310).

Some victims will fall as prey to the predator and will endure much anxiety and stress. It is imperative for these victims to seek mental health professionals to overcome their unfortunate reality. According to Domoney [8], “Records documented that many trafficked patients were living in situations of social, legal, and economic instability particularly with regards to accommodation and immigration status and that this posed a range of problems for mental health professionals” (p.4).

According to Le et al. [9] “A recent systematic review of the health literature on human trafficking showed that trafficked persons experience many negative health issues, including: violence and victimization; sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS; mental health disorders such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety; and physical pains and symptoms (e.g., headache, back pain, dental pain, memory problems, weight loss)” (p.220)

Parents, mental health professionals, and faith based organizations can assist youth in recognizing the tactics that are used to fuel this criminal activity. Burke [10] states that, “unique to trafficking is the repetitive experiences of coercion, betrayal, the exploitation victims experience in their early development, in their victimization, and sadly by those who seek to work with them to find freedom from traffickers” (p. 137). The church must strengthen the family and educate against these crafty ways of coercion that could lead a young person into this unwanted lifestyle. Mental health professionals and spiritual leaders should work together in an effort to help victims of this crime to recover. Altun et al. [11] concludes that “Mental health professionals have a role in responding to human trafficking. Awareness raising and training are required to ensure professionals are prepared to respond and safely identify and refer trafficked people to the care that they need and deserve” (p.23).

Faith Based Organizations and Spiritual Recovery

It is the responsibility of spiritual leaders and Christians to assist victims of human trafficking in the recovery process because victims suffer from issues of low self-esteem, depression, guilt, suicidal tendencies, and problems with forgiveness. Furthermore, Christianity is about starting over, starting a new life, and giving victims a chance to uplift their spirit by God, our Creator.

Spiritual recovery can play a key role in the recovery of integrating victims back into society. Spiritual leaders should work with mental health professionals to accomplish this goal. Faith based organizations can provide a spiritual renewal and construct to victims, and ultimately restored to Christ. Even with the mental issues that may remain, with spiritual growth and development, socially they will be able to function within a community that cares about their well-being. Cara et al. [12] state that, “Mental health services are providing care for survivors of human trafficking, many of whom will require long-term mental health, social, and welfare support” (p.7). Mental health professionals and other health care professionals can work with victims to provide spiritual contact in the community to enhance spiritual counseling needs.

Research shows that faith based organizations can be beneficial to victims in ways that help them to cope with their past and their future with God who is able to do above that which we ask of Him. Ephesians 3:23 states, “Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us”. God is able to renew the mind and bring about a sense of peace in victims of sexually exploited individuals. According to Frame [13], “FBOs “usually strive for social and spiritual transformation. Their programs facilitate the process of conversion and spiritual growth [13,14]”

Victims have attested to the fact that God, prayer, kindness, and love of others made a tremendous difference in regaining a new life. According to Deventer and Sremac [15]: “There are correlations

between the survivor and God. Each testimony acknowledged God as important and valuable in some shape or form. For example, testimony praying to God was meaningful and a habitual personal prayer life at home, a regular conversation or communion with God was a form of coping.” (p.443)

In scripture, God encourages Christians to attend to the needs of the oppressed. Psalm 103:6 states, “The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed (Psalm 103:6).” According to Deventer and Sremac [15], “Another testimony expressed a gratitude for the kindness of those who assisted them when they were in need. What others did for them, and the love that was extended, touched the victims deeply and was an integral part in their process of change” (p.443). Deventer and Sremac also states that, “Victims need trusting relationships with Christians who care not only about their physical well being, but also their mental and spiritual health. This group of abused people struggle with life and the history of physical and verbal violence. There is a direct correlation with trauma coping and a new life.” (p.443). Hope, love, kindness, a caring and compassionate disposition can give confidence to victims that they can start a new life. This can be true in academia and healthcare when dealing with victims. I Cor. 13:13 teaches that, “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity. According to Frame [13], “Staff from FBOs believed faith brought “added value” to the services they provided, though these perceptions differed based on country context and religious tradition [13].

Victims are looked on and rejected socially by their families for being a part of this criminal activity. They are in need of being educated, financially secure, and in need of family support. Dahal et al. [16] argues that, “The threats from society and pressures from one’s family and relatives add extra emotional and psychological strains, increasing threats of abuse and re-victimization. Stigmatization by the social environment, discouraging reintegration, is often cited as the primary cause of re-trafficking” (p.2).

Sex exploitation also targets lesbians, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities. All sexual immorality is sin to God, and especially the abuse and misuse of what is “not natural” is an abomination to God. Sexual trafficking among the LGBT community needs the same attention from law enforcement, as those in other groups. Boukli [17] points out that, “When people and law-makers imagine a trafficking victim they see a ‘white, cisgender girl from Eastern Europe, chained to a bed and forced into prostitution” (p. 76). This group also endures physical and verbal violence and abuses that need the same attention.

A part of mental and spiritual recovery has to start with renewal of the mind with sexual activity in the right framework. Parents and spiritual leaders need to create safe and non-judgmental spaces for youth to discuss sensitive topics like sex in biblical context, sexual health, and respect for one’s body. According to Stjerna [18], “Sex education often is gained from ill-informed practices and experiments, from locker rooms and cafeteria gossip, and through media. The Internet, with its easy and cheap access to pornography, can foster very unhealthy attitudes toward women’s bodies” (p. 175). Truth exposes sin, and when sin is admitted, addressed, and dealt with correctly, the outcome is good. Cloud [19] stresses that “reality is always your friend” (p.40). Through self-assessment, victims must face their past, which is a difficult task to do, but realize that no matter what their cultural background or experience has been with these criminal acts can be overcome. Victims can rest assured that no matter what has occurred to them that God is waiting to love them in the most intimate way.

According to Schreiber [20], “Trafficking survivors often have needs that extend beyond medical care, including housing, legal troubles, food insecurity, and more. The wide breadth of services a trafficking survivor may require, highlights the need for a team-based

approach and for protocols that make connections to resources seamless” (p.325).

Conclusion

Faith Based Organizations (FBOs), parents, and community leaders have an ethical obligation to ensure that anti-trafficking programs are in place for the education of youth and the community about the sexual exploitation of women and children. A recovery plan that includes mental health and spiritual recovery is essential for societal reintegration for victims. Spiritual leaders have the opportunity to advocate for training to make professional mental health referrals within their organizations. Education has to be at the center of prevention of this criminal activity. Proverbs 22 states, “Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). The author believes that the prevention of becoming a victim of this crime starts with taking time to educate youth on the tactics of commercial human trafficking, and a proper knowledge of sexual activity. According to Stjerna (2018) “Sex is so “normalized,” while “normal” families hardly talk about it at home. There has to be a counter-attack with healthier information about sexuality and a way to feed young people's minds with “the good stuff,” and a sense of the holy, so that they could better be shepherds, together, of freedoms in this important area of life. This means taking control of the information flow and sex education (p. 175).

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