

The trafficked child: trauma and resilience

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In order to address the particular needs of child survivors of trafficking, much more needs to be known about their background, experiences and hopes.

Human trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labour is believed to be one of the fastest growing areas of criminal activity. Child victims are particularly vulnerable but there is little systematic knowledge about their characteristics and experiences. They are often subsumed under the women and children heading without allowing for analysis of their special needs. Many writers use the word 'children' but focus on young women - and research on trafficked boys is non-existent. Limited knowledge impedes identification of child victims of trafficking, obstructs provision of appropriate, effective services and limits prevention of repeat victimisation.

This article presents preliminary findings from interviews with service providers in the US refugee foster care and unaccompanied minors (URM) programmes concerning 36 unaccompanied child survivors of trafficking, ranging in age from 12 to 17. Twenty-six were trafficked for sexual exploitation, four for domestic servitude, three for a combination of sex and domestic servitude and three for labour (including the only boy).

Background

While there are no orphans in this group, one of the children had been abandoned at birth. Twelve children reported lack of close relationships with parents, particularly with fathers, due to death, illness, parental separation or other problems. Eleven children had been sent to live with relatives or family friends. Very few children reported physical abuse from family members. Despite tenuous family relationships, many children remain attached to their relatives.

Extreme poverty drove many of the girls to migrate. In some

situations, parental illness compounded already dire economic circumstances and placed even more pressure on the children to contribute to the family's income. In other cases, family breakdowns resulting from death or divorce left the children vulnerable.

In some cases, the idea to migrate came from the girls, while in other situations a family member, friend or trafficker posing as a trustworthy individual planted the idea. In most cases, the girls' decision to migrate resulted from their desire to help their family financially or escape a difficult family situation. In virtually all cases the information on 'travel' to the U.S. was obtained from known individuals: relatives, family friends or other trustworthy persons. On a few occasions, girls migrated to follow 'boyfriends' who ended up trafficking them. When the idea to migrate came from others, it was usually presented as a favour. Traffickers told the children they could give them an opportunity in the US to earn money. They may have also engaged the parent with promises of a better life for the child. When the idea to migrate came from a family member, it was presented as a way to help the child 'pay back' or support parents.

The journey

It is hard to get detailed descriptions of the children's journey to the US. Given the stresses and trauma involved in migration this is hardly surprising. Clearly, most journeys are harrowing. Some survivors describe it as the worst part of the entire ordeal. One terrified girl reported that her trip to the US in the company of another girl and ten mostly adult males took six weeks. She hinted that sexual advances had been made but that one man had protected her. Hav-

ing been turned back at the Texas border both girls wanted to return to Honduras but were afraid to say so. The next attempt worked and they came over the border by hanging on to the underchassis of a truck.

URM staff often avoid asking questions about the children's migration experience for fear that if they are subpoenaed this information might be used by the traffickers' defence team. Law enforcement agencies provide only limited information regarding migration and trafficking circumstances of the child survivors. Caseworkers' ability to tailor individual treatment plans is therefore severely hindered. Given that dealing with these experiences is essential to survivors' post-trafficking adjustment, receiving a child in care with no information as to her history or factors precipitating trafficking makes initial engagement and subsequent treatment extremely difficult.

Perceptions of victimhood

The children's treatment in trafficking situations varied considerably depending on the type of trafficking and their relationship to the traffickers. Girls with kinship ties to their 'employers' could keep money they earned and were often treated better than girls who could not claim such relationships. Reportedly, the latter group had all their income confiscated. Some girls reported relative freedom while others had to endure horrific physical and mental abuse and forced prostitution.

Understanding the children's perception of their identity as victims plays an important role in post-trafficking adjustment. None of the children were overtly happy but some did not see themselves as having been mistreated. Children who cooperated with the perpetrators or enjoyed aspects of their experiences (such as pretty clothes, freedom, boyfriends,

drugs or alcohol) may have been more susceptible to trauma and more resistant to therapy. Thus, their self-identity, understanding of their situation and subsequent goals may have conflicted with the goals of service providers and law enforcement officers. Clear identification of someone as a perpetrator has been correlated with less traumatic aftermath in studies of molested children. In situations where the perpetrator was a relative or a boyfriend, there may be a feeling of greater betrayal resulting in a higher likelihood of a traumatic response. The situation was even more complex in cases where the traffickers were family members. The survivors were hesitant to speak openly of the situation for fear of implicating their relatives or reprisals on family members left behind in the country of origin.

The children's lack of identity as victims was closely related to their expectations about coming to the US. Almost all of the children were highly motivated to migrate to the US in the hope of earning money. Many of them had compelling reasons to send money home and had to repay smuggling fees. Typically, the children's desire to earn money does not change once they are rescued. Obviously, URM programmes reflect US laws requiring children to attend school, defining the age of employment and number of hours a minor child is allowed to work, and requiring a work permit. These restrictions may run counter to many children's goals and lead to a struggle as they adjust to their new lives. These issues have long-term consequences for the children's commitment to education and affect their desire to remain in care.

The children's reluctance to see themselves as victims stood in sharp contrast to the perceptions of service providers who referred to the children as victims, often because the law conceptualises them as victims. However, many caseworkers emphasised the children's resilience and appreciated our deliberate use of the term 'survivors'. While we recognise the legal necessity to use the term 'victim,' therapeutically speaking the identity of a 'victim' may be counter-productive.

Trauma and treatment

The concept of 'trauma' is equally ambivalent. A relatively small number of children in this sample meet the criteria of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Some children presented no psychological disturbance, while others exhibited symptoms of depression. Indeed, depression was the most common diagnosis. The cultural issues regarding appropriate expression of emotion are important in their treatment but are unevenly addressed. Trafficking experiences and resulting psychological consequences must be viewed within the child's cultural, social and historical contexts. Indeed, service providers may cause trauma when these contexts are not taken into account.

To mitigate the psychological consequences of trafficking, children were offered a wide range of treatment options: individual or group therapy, counselling by a torture treatment specialist, and dance and art therapy. Initially, many children refused to avail themselves of psychological services but programme staff was persistent. Eventually, most children were in treatment. Many programmes clearly wanted all children to participate in therapy and were convinced about the efficacy of this treatment. Some followed their agency's protocol as to the appropriate use of therapy and the children's interest and willingness to attend sessions. Other programmes' decisions depended on the availability of resources. In most instances, decisions were influenced by what services were available and/or reimbursable.

Many social workers reported that the children in their care took a significant amount of time to bond, even when matched with linguistically and culturally competent caseworkers. Furthermore, once established, the relationship was often more intense than is typical. Many of the children imbued the social workers with powers and knowledge that they did not (and could not) have. The concept of *in loco parentis* was often exacerbated. The social worker had to be an extraordinary advocate with complex and encumbered systems, including

in many cases the immigration authorities, social security and public assistance services as well as attorneys for both the child and the prosecution.

Recommendations

In order to enhance assistance to child survivors of human trafficking it is important to:

- place children in stable care as soon as possible, for patience and consistent presence of the caseworkers are crucial to bonding with the child
- be flexible: children's perception of their situation may be at odds with the perception and plans of service providers
- ensure small caseloads and consistent care
- use culturally competent - preferably bilingual and bicultural - therapists able to respect the cultural and personal identity of their clients and recognise their strengths
- balance the conflicting needs of law enforcement and service providers regarding information sharing
- encourage law enforcement staff to train caseworkers about the type of information that is likely to be subpoenaed and used against the child as well as how to ask and record sensitive information without jeopardising the child's safety
- enable caseworkers to train law enforcement staff regarding the importance of understanding the child's history in order to maximise placement stability.

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