

Fastest Growing Crime with Invisible Chains: A Review of Escaping Sex Trafficking Frameworks in Canada

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Abstract—Survivors of sex trafficking often report extensive harm not just from the violence itself, but multiple levels such as internalized shame, societal misunderstandings, and the process of reporting, exiting, and healing. The aim of this article is to examine the multi-layered approach to supporting survivors who are exiting sex trafficking through immediate, short-term, and long-term care approaches. We present a systematic review of the current barriers structurally, psychosocially, and psychologically through a Canadian perspective, and apply them to the interventions within the service continuum, basic needs, and further needs and supports to consider. This article suggests that ongoing and additional funding to survivor's support services, specialized police and health care training, and increased prevention and public education on the realities of sex trafficking in Canada is a necessity for survivor healing, and the prevention of further harm.

Keywords—Canada Sex Trafficking, exiting sex trafficking, sex trafficking survivors, sex trafficking supports.

I. INTRODUCTION

SEX trafficking involves more than the mere act of selling someone's body for sex. The trafficking process is a deep psychologically manipulative crime, whereby traffickers lure, groom, coerce, manipulate, and then exploit their victim(s) to strangers to be sexually abused [1]. There are many forms of human trafficking occurring virtually, domestically, and internationally, which, according to the Government of Canada [2] involves seeking out victims, exerting control and power over their movements and actions, to exploit them for financial gain. Sex trafficking is one of the most common forms of human trafficking due to the demand for sexually exploited bodies and the reluctance to report due to the extent of physical, psychological, and emotional harm, cultural stigma, misunderstandings of trafficking, as well as the incredibly lengthy and grueling process the survivors face when exiting and reporting [3].

It is extremely difficult to pinpoint exactly how many victims are, or have been trafficked for sex in Canada, and the only estimates received comes from those who interact with the legal system. According to Canadian police collected statistics, 1099 cases of human sex trafficking were reported to police between 2009 and 2016, and between 2005 and 2017, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Human Trafficking National Coordination laid charges in 455 cases [4].

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the literature of clinical, cultural, educational, and legal dimensions of the causes of sex trafficking, interventions for survivors, and legal considerations of sex trafficking within Canada. Sexual violence, which impacts one in three Canadian women, one in six Canadian men, and one in two Canadian trans or non-binary folk [5], is an umbrella term to encompass the plethora of acts that are sexually harmful, to which, sex trafficking falls under. With how pervasive sexual violence is in Canada, it is vital that we not only employ effective strategies for supporting survivors, but also teach Canadians of all ages, and education levels to understand not only what these sexually violent acts are, but also how to intervene, dismantle the systems that can cause further harm, and rebuild a culture of trauma informed care.

This review seeks to assert that there is a multi-layered approach to supporting survivors of sex trafficking that has immediate, short-term, and long-term care approaches, as well as the recommendations for additional funding for survivor's support services, specialized police and health care training, and increased prevention and public education on the realities of sex trafficking in Canada.

II. THE PROBLEM

Sex trafficking is a profitable criminal operation for those who participate in exploiting others (John's, pimps, or traffickers), as an individual, or a group, due to the ability to sell a body for sex multiple times in one night [6]. Victims that are trafficked for sexual exploitation, including those who are under the age of 18, and therefore cannot legally consent, all are controlled, and pressured into engaging in a variety of sexual acts for monetary exchange, usually going to the trafficker and not the victim [7]. The victims of sex trafficking can be any gender identity, but women and girls make up 97% of all reported cases of sex trafficking [8]. Persons trafficked for sex experience luring and grooming by a loving, caring "boyfriend" that buys lots of gifts, and provides favors, also known as a 'Romeo Pimp'. After some time, the victim is then forced to engage in these sexual acts as a form of debt bondage, to "pay back" the trafficker during the luring and grooming stage. [3]. If the victim fails to perform these sexual acts, they are then subjected to physical, emotional abuse and violence. These sexual acts are not limited to penetrative, or oral sex, but can

also expand into other areas such as erotic dancing, or performing for distributable content, such as images, or videos. Survivors of trafficking feel as if they have no power in their lives, there is no choice, only coercion. For which, the victims feel as if they must perform these sexual activities to not be punished, harmed, or, on the other hand, to receive appreciation, care, food, housing, and/or drugs [9].

When victims are attempting to exit from being trafficked for sex, they face several barriers structurally, while navigating the barriers within themselves psychosocially, and psychologically. We will now briefly examine each of these barriers, pulling out key factors of what service providers should keep in mind prior to the interventions and treatment process for those exiting this violence.

A. Structural Barriers

Structural barriers to seeking supports involve the societal structures and norms that elevate vulnerability factors of victimization and harm [10], as in this case, factors that contribute to an individual becoming trafficked for sex. These societal structures and norms influence one's perception, prejudices, and actions of those who are not only accessing the support service but those providing the service as well. Three of the main structural barriers of discrimination that Nobel et al. [11] note in their research on Canadian survivors of sex trafficking are colonization, race, and gender. Colonization is a structural barrier that contributed to the genocide of Indigenous populations, and continues to contribute to the mistreatment, stereotypes, and murders of Indigenous populations, specifically women, girls, and two-spirit folks [12]. Even though Indigenous women and girls make up less than 4% of the population, they account for over 50% of victims in Canada [13]. The effects of intergenerational trauma from such colonizing legislative processes of Residential Schools, and the Sixty's Scoop, led to ongoing struggles with poverty, substance abuse, distrust of law officials, and mental health concerns [12]. This trauma, ongoing health battles, and racist perceptions made Indigenous girls and women more vulnerable to being trafficked for sex. From this, additional considerations are needed for racialized trafficking survivors. To this, Baird et al. [14] acknowledge the intersection of self-esteem issues for racialized folks, as well as trafficking survivors. Gender discrimination and gender-based violence operate based on patriarchal norms and expectations of gender, and how it is performed. Survivors in Nobel et al. [11] study acknowledge the historical perceptions of women as 'property' to be bought and used by men, and how those historical ideals still play into the sexual victimization of women. Since most of the sexual assault, and domestic violence centers only support women-identifying persons [15], there are gaps in access to support services for queer, gender non-conforming, and male identified survivors. These service gaps, alongside gender roles and expectations led to further exploitation that carries on from the trafficking and into the 'healing.'

B. Psychosocial Barriers

Psychosocial barriers to seeking supports reflect one's

connection and influence of other folks in their life (family, friends, service providers etc.), and their emotional well-being in relation to those connections [16]. Three key barriers within this realm include isolation and survivor's social support networks, trust, and the possibility of recognition from their previous life being trafficked. Physical and social isolation is a common tactic of control that domestic violence abusers exert onto to their victims to limit their ability to make connections to potential resources in the outside world [17]. This isolation and removal from supports is no different within the acts of sex trafficking, with the addition of ongoing movement, from one city/hotel/motel to the next, by the trafficker to disorient their victim [14]. As a result of this movement, and inability to make strong connections with outside supports, victims usually develop strong bonds with those who are in similar networks, or 'street families', as they have related experiences [11]. This isolation leads to a development of distrust within the survivors, which could appear as a distrust for friends and family who 'don't get it', for why their trafficker for harming them, and ultimately a distrust of law enforcement due to the grooming stage of exploitation [11]. Many survivors of trafficking feel as if they were part of the sex industry, and because of this they feel a sense of concern of people possibly recognizing them from their involvement in this, and the stigma that sex workers face, often leads to difficulties securing housing or employment. The possibility of recognition can not only negatively impact social interactions, but their mental health as well. Many survivors [11] cite, "severe anxiety, depression, guilt, and shame," (p.36), as some of the emotional and mental impacts of being trafficked, which moves us into psychological barriers.

C. Psychological Barriers

Psychological barriers to seeking supports refer to a survivor's mental and emotional awareness of connecting to and understanding themselves [18]. Among the sex trafficking survivors in [11], psychological factors were discussed with the most frequency. Three key barriers within this area consist of past and current trauma experiences, complicity and guilt, and a sense of hopelessness. Trauma can occur at any point in our lives, varying in severity, and consistency. Survivors of trafficking are no exception to this, as Baird et al. [14] note that youth who have been a part of the child welfare system are over-represented amongst sex trafficking victims, which makes sense when we reflect on colonization and the intergenerational Indigenous trauma of the Sixties Scoop, and the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system. Following the childhood trauma, the trauma of sex trafficking only deepens the psychological wounds, resulting in, but not limited to, difficulty attaching to others [19], post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression and many more [20]. Those scars that trauma leaves on the individual often have difficulties healing due to the guilt and complicity that survivors of sex trafficking often experience as of result of the violence they believe to have put themselves through [10]. Sex trafficking survivors are often pressured into criminal activity, such as drug use or selling of drugs, stealing, and recruiting

other victims into the 'game' to lessen the harm they are experiencing, or to gain credibility among higher level traffickers [18]. During the exiting process, survivors feel this sense of remorse for the harm that has not only occurred to them, but to all the others that they brought into this criminal activity. Unsure of how to heal, where to turn to, and if there is money to be made in the world outside of trafficking, survivors often must navigate feelings of hopelessness in a system that rarely convicts traffickers and has long shelter/support wait times for survivors [5]. Survivors require a diverse array of supports to not only navigate exiting in a way that is safe for not only themselves, friends, and families whose lives may be at risk by traffickers exerting threats, but also have a fulfilling, healing life after the trafficking trauma.

III. INTERVENTIONS

From the previous section, it should be abundantly clear that the impacts of trafficking go deeper than the sexual acts themselves, but rather from the internal psychological, emotional, and mental factors to the external factors of psychosocial, and structural. With that being said, the interventions and treatments to support survivors of sex trafficking thus need to employ a magnitude of services, that truly go beyond what one center can offer. Healing from sexual trauma requires a community of collaborative care. This section will now recognize those same multi-layered approaches from the previous section and apply them to interventions within the Service Continuum, Basic Needs, and Further Needs and Supports to Consider.

A. Service Continuum

The effects of trauma and experiences of sex trafficking vary from one individual to the next. It is vital that the supports and services also reflect the various needs and experiences of survivors. Not every survivor is going to want to walk down the same healing path, where some are able to access supports and reconnect with family and community, others may not be able to access these services due to the complexity of their trauma and more extensive service interventions that are required. One of the negative outcomes that survivors of sex trafficking experience is that they may fall back to their traffickers, or the industry, because it is a space that is familiar to survivors [21]. This reveals that the exiting, or healing process, for survivors of trafficking is not linear, and thus requires supportive services that are able to freely adjust and navigate various care strategies based on the flux of their physical, mental, and emotional health. According to Canadian Survivors of Sex Trafficking and the Service Providers, the main service continuum includes Outreach, Crisis, Acute, Stable, and Long-Term services [11]. Outreach services should consist of low-barrier, welcoming, informative harm reduction care, that provides a safe space, with non-judgmental options for anyone, whether they are identified as survivors or not [22]. The key to successful outreach services for survivors of sex trafficking is flexibility in operation hours, walk/drop in options available and relationship building frameworks due to the excessive mobile nature of trafficking and disconnection that survivors have with

their communities [14]. Next, crisis intervention supports are vital for some survivors of trafficking due to the danger and safety concerns that may arise during exiting stages, or when they experience triggers, or flashbacks due to the trauma [5]. Another service support could be within the acute needs that come from the immediate period of crisis. These acute needs are centered around the rebuilding process, with the main goals of providing safe accommodations, to reflect on their own needs without the possibility of those psychosocial pressures [21]. Once a survivor has reached some levels of stability and calm, supports can shift into transitional approaches. These transitional approaches are employed when a survivor's healing and coping 'toolbox' has been developed through psychological and structural care. Having this foundation creates an opportunity for the survivor to work on healing for non-immediate needs, such as drug and alcohol addiction, tattoo removal, employment, education, and moving into longer term supports [21]. This transition stage could also include a re-connection to historical supports, such as their friends, family, and community [11]. Survivors often note a sense of hopelessness in this stage as a result of the ongoing, and exhausting amount of effort that has gone into undoing the trauma in survivor's bodies and minds. One of the final services on the continuum is long-term supports, which revolve around promoting ongoing stability, effective navigation of triggers, and disappointments that could arise, such as losing a job, death of a loved one, and failing a school course [18]. Progression of this continuum is not linear, and many survivors bounce around from one spot on the continuum to another, but one of the key approaches to intervention always comes down to survivor's basic needs being met, which we will cover next.

B. Basic Needs

No matter where survivors seek out help, their basic needs must be of primary concern for successful interventions. One of the key manipulative tactics that traffickers exert within the grooming stage of victimization is to slowly start to take away their victims' access to basic needs, and replace them with the trafficker, so that the victim begins to rely on their trafficker to live [3]. If a service provider is unable to provide those basic needs, and the survivor is at risk of experiencing homelessness or deep financial hardship, the survivor may fall back into trafficking because their basic needs are not being met [21]. Some key concepts of basic needs, as noted by Canadian survivors, include safety, transportation, clothing, food, income, housing, and communication [11]. Not only is it important to provide access and a variety of community agencies to re-connect survivors to multiple resources, but to also understand the possibility of recruitment occurring within these systems, especially at shelters. Traffickers will often groom and recruit survivors in these spaces because they are in an incredibly vulnerable position of crisis, acute, and transitional need [14]. It is only when service providers can create foundational resources and care strategies for a survivor's basic needs, that they can then connect the survivors to other service needs.

C. Further Needs and Supports to Consider

In addition to the foundational, basic care needs being met, service providers can look to further intervention and treatments that begin to recognize the true self-identity within the survivor and begin to work with them in their exiting from trafficking. Not every survivor is going to want to interact with the legal system. Encouragement to report or speak to law officials could lead to added distrust for not only the legal system but also the services being provided “on-to” the survivor. This does not mean offering legal, and court services is off the table, but rather, creating an environment built on the importance of the survivor’s choice, advocacy and power begins to build the resiliency within themselves [23]. Some important further supports those Canadian survivors necessitate are round-the-clock access to supports with no time restrictions, fostering community membership, education on healthy relationships, mental health and addiction treatments, reconnection to their family, and culturally and spiritually relevant care [18], [11]. Yet, the services provided do not just rely on the services themselves, but rather the provider who is able to recognize the signs of trafficking and deliver the specialization of care that is required because of the many complexities of trauma described throughout this paper.

IV. LEGAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to the Government of Canada [24], within the *Criminal Code* there are six offenses that relate to human trafficking, which can result in imprisonment from one year minimum to 14 years, depending on the severity and intersections of more survivors and other crimes that were committed. When investigating the cases of sex trafficking, Ibrahim [25] found that out of the 306 reported cases, 8.5% resulted in a guilty verdict, that means that 91.5% of reports of sex trafficking did not result in the trafficker being found guilty. Many survivors of sex trafficking are extremely reluctant to report to authorities based on a variety of factors such as, an initial distrust for police (especially within racialized, queer, and Indigenous communities), low conviction rates, the lengthy and traumatic process of going to court, and ultimately, if a guilty verdict is not reached, there is a fear of retaliation from the trafficker [18], [11], [3]. On the other hand, there are survivors that claim the court process was “empowering... to hold trafficker accountable,” [11, p.27], most of these survivors were that of historical instances of sex trafficking, and were settled in much more stable conditions, both physically and mentally.

Since the criminal justice process is not suitable for all survivors of sex trafficking, there have been investigations into alternative forms of justice. Restorative justice practices assert that the current criminal justice process and the negative outcomes connected to imprisonment and convictions are not the most effective way to respond to crimes perpetrated against a person [26]. Restorative justice approaches establish a nonpunitive, survivor-centered space, whereby a discussion, apology, and admission of wrongdoing from the trafficker (in this case) along with a compensation of reparations is the goal.

Yu et al. [27] spoke to 80 survivors of sex trafficking and found that very few survivors have experienced a restorative justice practice, yet survivors found these alternative approaches to justice encouraging and desirable. The main limitation to restorative approaches is to ensure that they are being carried out by not only those who specialize in restorative spaces, but also possess a lens of the intricacies of the impacts of sex trafficking. This process can be activating for survivors when not approached with care, and this, in essence, takes a great deal of time, effort and energy for all involved.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the information emphasized from previous sections on the causes, the interventions, and legal and ethical considerations of supporting those involved with, or exiting sex trafficking, there is a great deal of multi-level care that needs to be employed. These recommendations to support those who are exiting sex trafficking, highlight the need for more and continued funding, enhanced and specialized training for support providers, and the demand for prevention education of sex trafficking. In Canada, there has been an influx of funding for services who are directly working with victims of trafficking, in such that, July of 2020, the Ministry of Women and Gender Equity Canada announced \$19 million in funds to support these agencies across Canada [28]. Since the basic needs of survivors is core to their healing and safety, supports and agencies are spread widely across communities, such that, a specific service, such as accessing a phone to call family, may not have received that funding because their work is not only, or directed towards, sex trafficking survivors. With this being said, more social services funding is vital for the exiting and healing of sex trafficking survivors. Survivors report more productive and better experiences with law enforcement and general service providers that have specialized and trained professionals on sex trafficking [14]. From this we are recommending creating specialized training, and teams dedicated to providing survivors of sex trafficking trauma informed, and survivor centered care. Finally, as times and technology change, so do the strategies that traffickers employ to lure and groom their victims. With this, we are calling to the importance of ongoing updates to educational curriculums across elementary and secondary schools to reflect deeper, and relevant topics of consent, healthy relationships, sex, and intimacy, and of course, the prevalence of sex trafficking and sexual violence, and where to seek support if you feel as if you may be experiencing these forms of harm.

Throughout this review paper, we have addressed the multi-layered approach to supporting survivors of sex trafficking that has immediate, short-term, and long-term care approaches due to the extensive amount of structural, psychosocial, and psychological barriers. We then concluded with our recommendations for additional funding to survivor’s support services, specialized police and health care training, and increased prevention and public education on the realities of sex trafficking in Canada. It is vital that survivors of these horrific, and brutal forms of sexual violence understand that they are not alone and that there is hope. The impacts and responses to

trauma are normal reactions, to abnormal events, that were not of their own choice. Empowering survivors and communities with the knowledge of sex trafficking and the community led supports will pave the path to stronger and engaged movements to combat human sex trafficking.

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