

Chapter 13

Human Trafficking

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ABSTRACT

More than 800,000 children and women are victims of human trafficking each year; they are kidnapped or sold into sex work under the guise of occupational opportunities or the promise of a romantic relationship. The developmental and psychosocial impacts of being trafficked are overwhelmingly challenging for both women and children; thus, there is international need for trauma-informed psychosocial supports that can validate victims' experiences while enhancing coping skills and resilience. Therefore, this chapter will describe the work of a certified child life specialist within a nonprofit aftercare organization in India dedicated to the physical, psychological, and educational support of women who have experienced trafficking. As can be seen, the foundational knowledge, skills, and interventions of a certified child life specialist, when paired with cultural humility and deeply grounded in trauma-informed care, can foster safe and therapeutic relationships while teaching and modeling the lifelong coping skills that are instrumental for ongoing healing.

INTRODUCTION

Suvarna is a 17-year-old female. Hailing from a small village outside of Mumbai, she grew up in poverty as the middle of three sisters. At age 10, widespread drought decimated her family's small crop. So, when a family friend offered to take Suvarna and her sisters into their home in the city, it seemed like an opportunity to improve her current living situation and provide for her aging parents simultaneously. However, when the girls arrived in Mumbai things were not as they seemed, and the family friend was nowhere to be found. Instead, Suvarna and her sisters were met by a brothel owner who clothed them, fed them, and then forced them into sex work to "pay off their debts."*

**Names and details in this chapter have been altered to protect the safety and privacy of those involved.*

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Human Trafficking

It is difficult to trace the precise origins of human trafficking, as many cultures have at some point or another employed practices that enslave or exploit other human beings; however, human trafficking remains an international problem even in today's world (Rai & Rai, 2021). Whether called human trafficking, sex trafficking, or commercial sexual exploitation, **human trafficking** is defined as:

Recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring 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 or the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery, or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs (United Nations, 2000, p. 42).

Although likely a gross underrepresentation of the true extent of human trafficking practices across the globe, it is estimated that more than 800,000 children and individuals are sold into these various forms of human slavery each year; 80% of these victims will be forced into sex work of some kind (Locke, 2010).

Unfortunately, the human trafficking industry preys upon developmentally and psychosocially vulnerable minor children and adults with very little individual and social resources, perceived or actual power, and marginalized groups (Rai & Rai, 2021). Additionally, the prevalence of human trafficking is greater in underdeveloped countries, areas rife with poverty, and tribal societies living in rural or isolated areas (Dalla & Kreimer, 2017). Despite being able to identify these high-risk groups and areas, human trafficking remains a global issue, likely due to its intersection with other social issues such as corruption, poverty, and immigration. In the United States, those most at risk of sex trafficking are children who identify with minority sexual orientations and gender statuses, who are homeless or have a history of running away from their home environments, have identified mental health needs, are engaged in substance abuse, and have previous experience with the juvenile justice system (Browne-James et al., 2021).

Entry into the human trafficking industry is a traumatic event. Whether the individual has been defrauded into a false romantic relationship, violently kidnapped from their home or community, sold by family members or friends that they once trusted, or lured by the promise of a career opportunity that does not exist, each pathway is fraught with intense emotion, lack of control, a sense of powerlessness, and feelings of helplessness (Dalla & Kreimer, 2017). Moreover, the victim has been extracted from their normative context and community and forced into a host of new environments, situations, and relationships that are unsafe, unpredictable, and externally controlled (da Silva & Sathiyaseelan, 2019). And, whilst working within the confines of coerced servitude, there is little to no access to social support, basic healthcare, mental health resources, or other avenues with the potential to bolster coping and resilience (Dalla & Kreimer, 2017).

Thus, the psychosocial and developmental impacts of human trafficking are multiple, intense, and often unaddressed for long periods of time, if ever. With the knowledge that many are children, adolescents, and young adults from vulnerable backgrounds, there is a collective urgency for and responsibility to locate, rescue, rehabilitate, and support victims of human trafficking in local and global communities. Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLSs), although typically found within pediatric healthcare settings, are psychosocial professionals with the developmental expertise, emphasis on trauma-informed care, and resilience-focused orientation this population needs and deserves as part of comprehensive survivorship care (Boles et al., 2020). However, since little is currently known about child life work in

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