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# Understanding child survivors of human trafficking: A micro and macro level analysis

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## Abstract

The rate of childhood trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation has been on the global rise. In order to prevent the continued increase of the number of at-risk children, integrative micro and macro level models have been found to be most effective in terms of the prevention and intervention of human trafficking. The purpose of this paper is to tackle social aspects of child trafficking including the phenomenon of the feminization of trafficking, and the psychological consequences experienced by the child survivor. Effective psychotherapy that focuses on an integration of the self, interpersonal reparation, and cultural reintegration will be highlighted through prevalent trauma-focused models and clinical observations.

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## 1. Introduction

Children have been identified as one of the primary and most vulnerable targets of human trafficking for the purpose of labor or sexual exploitation. It is estimated that 12.3 million individuals fall prey to the enslavement of trafficking, and it is predicted that with each year an additional one million will emerge (Fisher, 2009). Additional statistics suggest that 80% of victims are typically women and girls, and 50% are under the age of 18 (Chung, 2009), and that an estimated 80% are victims of sexual exploitation (Fisher, 2009). Research tragically remains scarce and the dearth of empirical studies especially in the field of child human trafficking is salient. This research gap may be attributed to several socio-cultural factors ranging from poverty, war, to shame and fear, all of which maintain victims entrapped in long term silence and isolation.

Child victims of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation endure repeated “fraud, force, and coercion” (Fisher, 2009; Stotts Jr. & Ramey, 2009) in service of pornography and prostitution. The majority of these child victims have also been subjected to pre-trafficking traumas ranging from social and large scale traumas such as marginalization due to poverty and war, to familial traumas such as previous exposure to child abuse, abrupt parental separation due to migration, or to being sold once or repeatedly by a parent or a family member. Child victims continue to be exposed to trauma during their migration journey (Gozdziak, Bump, Duncan, MacDonnell, & Loiselle, 2006) as they may be exposed to violent threats and restricted orders regarding their behavior as they enter

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their new destination. Upon arrival, victims yet again will be exposed to an additional layer of trauma that includes repetitive psychological torture and manipulation, and forced sexual exploitation including rape and assault in order to induct the child into what has been coined “modern day slavery” (Stotts Jr. & Ramey, 2009).

Child victims of trafficking, as a result, suffer several inter and intra-personal injuries that may lead to future victimization and relapse into the trafficking cycle if they are not to receive timely and consistent interventions. For the purpose of this paper, a psychological analysis, based on a compilation of research as well as clinical observations from the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children<sup>1</sup>, that is geared toward healing the complex layers specific to childhood trafficking and which addresses core components of developmental and complex trauma, will be presented. It is further imperative to focus on prevention and advocacy, and in line with this approach, a social theory of trafficking in childhood will be illustrated. Intertwining the micro and macro level factors in a unified model of child trafficking protection and prevention is integral for providing early intervention and protection from relapse to the cycle of trafficking, as well as prevention of childhood trafficking.

## 2. The social context of childhood trafficking: A macro level analysis

Human trafficking is one of the largest and the fastest growing industries worldwide, generating annual profits of \$32 billion (Reed resist exploitation, embrace dignity, 2011). Meanwhile, human trafficking is not a new phenomenon, it is indeed ancient, and there is ample evidence documenting its long standing existence. However, the forms and patterns of this phenomenon have changed over time, according to the change in socio-economic and political systems. The practice of human trafficking today is not the same as it was in 1920 for example, and the socio-economic factors and practices that influence it to thrive have also evolved.

In the present, and with increasing globalization, sex trafficking have also increased tremendously. The economic disparity between the global north and the south, as well as the feminization of poverty, all weave into stories of sex trafficking. As O'Brien (2009) stated:

*Globalization's effects on economies and the environment have created a supply of women and children to be trafficked, and an easy movement of people by traffickers, who benefit from corrupt authorities. While the feminization of poverty and gender-based violence exist worldwide, environmental injustice and unfair economic policies disproportionately harm poor women and girls in developing nations. A system favoring "developed" nations in the name of globalization, which promotes "free" trade, contributes to global sex trafficking by increasing economic inequality and disadvantaging the "poorest of the poor" (P. 8)*

Illegal human trafficking for sex industries, and for various types of formal and informal labor markets, strongly overlaps with some of the major dynamics constitutive of globalization; the formation of global markets, the intensifying of transnational and translocal networks, and the development of smart communication technologies that can easily break away from conventional surveillance practices. The strengthening of the existing global circuit, and in some cases the formation of new ones contribute to the existence of a global economic system and its associated development of various institutional supports for cross-border money flows and markets (Sassen, 2002). These economic changes had significant impacts on developing economies. To be part of the global economy, and to meet the global challenges and demands, the developing economies had to implement a bundle of new policies and accommodate new conditions associated with globalization including structural adjustment programs, the opening up to foreign firms, the elimination of multiple state subsidies, and financial crises and the prevailing types of programmatic solutions put forth by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Sassen, 2002). These conditions have created enormous costs for certain sectors of these developing economies, and of the population, and have not fundamentally reduced government debt. As O'Brien (2009) argues, the IMF provided loans to poor countries, only

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<sup>1</sup>The Dubai Foundation for Women and Children is an organization located in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, dedicated to providing comprehensive psycho-social services to victims of human trafficking, domestic violence, and child abuse.

*replaced survival agriculture and food production for local or national markets, and finally, the ongoing and mostly heavy burden of government debt in most of these economies forced them to borrow and become indebted, thereby allowing the IMF and other lenders to control their national policies. (p.9)*

Globalization, with its neoliberal policies, worked on displacing people in favor of cash crop agriculture, increasing the landless and leading to increased labor migration and urbanization, causing people to leave rural homes in search of work in factories inside and outside their homeland to serve the global market. In fact, the largest wave of migration in world history occurred during globalization; women and children, being the disadvantaged and most vulnerable social group, and the most likely to suffer from these economic changes. Globalization has left millions of women impoverished, unemployed, paid “the lowest salaries,” and overworked as they subsidize a neoliberal economic agenda.

Women comprise nearly half of the world’s migrants, and are the most vulnerable to exploitation, as they face discrimination in hiring and in employment, and are often forced to work in industries with widespread labor abuses, such as the tourist industry where they treat women as commodity, and use their bodies as one of its main attractions. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that the groups of women in this context are not the middle upper class women, nor the educated skilled ones, but rather the poor, unskilled, uneducated, and low-earning women who are always regarded as low value-added individuals, and mostly considered as a burden, rather than a resource. These devalued and disadvantaged women, in the time of economic despairing, become significant sources for profit-making, and for government revenue enhancement; the use of women's bodies as commodities has proven to be very profitable across borders, their bodies worth more than their humanity. Hence, their bodies become the alternative way of making a living, and of making a profit.

The free trade in goods means also the free travelling and movement of these women's bodies across borders. This, in fact, assists the traffickers in their trafficking business, and facilitates for them the recruitment and the transportation of women and children for the sex tourist industry. Globalization goes beyond the traditional use of nation’s borders as it is now utilized as a main source for the flourishing new "modern" slavery system (O’Brien, 2009).

The rise of an exploitative global service sector that relies heavily on the trafficking of migrants, mainly women and children, for the sake of the sex industry has two sides; the globalization of the economy which is the main reason behind the development of a global market that provides service industry based on the commoditization of women and children of the poorer countries; and the other side being the dependence of the whole communities of these poor countries (including states) on the income of women for their survival. The poor economy of the so called south nations becomes partially dependent on the remittances of these women, whom are mainly working in either semi-formal economies such as the tourist industry or in a shadow economy as a sex worker (Young, 2002). As a result, these socio-economic fluctuations and patterns deem children and women at high risk and vulnerable for a complex psychological journey.

### **3. The psychology of childhood trafficking: A micro level analysis**

It is expected that child victims of trafficking present with a multi-faceted psychological picture as a result of a multi-layered exposure to trauma. Current and yet limited research on trafficking victims suggests that trafficked and sexually exploited children may experience a myriad of trauma related symptoms ranging from depression, anxiety, social isolation, distrust, to dissociation, and splitting (Stotts & Ramey, 2009). An empirical study on a sample of 204 child and adult female survivors of trafficking (Hossain, Zimmerman, Abas, Light, & Watts, 2010) demonstrated that exposure to sexual violence and injuries during captivity is related to higher levels of symptoms

of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Additional research findings corroborate that the majority of females in pornography or prostitution have been exposed to at least one or more specific traumas including childhood sexual abuse, childhood physical abuse, and rape or repetitive assault in prostitution (Farley, Cotton, Lynne, Zumbek, Spiwak, Reyes, Alvarez, & Sezgin, 2003). Researchers further suggest that victims of such complex trauma as trafficking also suffer from social consequences in addition to psychological and emotional symptoms, such as physical, educational, intellectual, and cultural and spiritual deprivation. For this reason, prominent trauma theorists suggested that victims exposed to such complex trauma warrant a specialized diagnosis of complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) that additionally entails alterations in self and consciousness, interpersonal alterations such as that of the relationship with the perpetrator (s) and alterations in the surrounding system including beliefs and meaning (Courtois, 2004; Herman, 1997). To add to this complex picture, child victims, also suffer developmental traumas that are characterized by disruptions in attachments and affect expression and regulation (Heineman, 1998). Though child victims of trafficking may simultaneously share several psychological symptoms with survivors of other types of trauma, they may also diverge in developmental aspects such as in their sense of self, interpersonal connections, and cultural identities, as illustrated below.

### *3.1. Disintegration of the self versus integration*

Victims of trauma are typically prone to experiencing splitting in their sense of self. Celani (1994) theorized that the abused child may develop and rely on their abused or “bad” self, while struggling to formulate a sense of the non-abused or “good” self. Celani further extended this model to victims of domestic violence, whereby this technique is used by victims of abuse to cope with experiences of annihilation and separation anxiety, and abandonment panic, even in response to the abuser. While this can be perceived as a coping and survival mechanism, it can also serve as a threat to the self as the victim may revert back to the abusive or exploitation cycle and to their abused or exploited selves during periods of heightened stress and anxiety.

Trafficked children undergo repeated traumas starting with their abrupt separation from their primary caregivers, and in some cases, their sense of betrayal by family members when they are sold. The majority of children are also not prepared or informed of this separation prior, and in turn they find themselves suddenly confronted with a new “caregiver,” a new identity, and a new country. These unexpected changes may lead the child to develop a sense of self that is defined by disempowerment and worthlessness; as they did not have a choice in the decision to leave the family.

Children, who are trafficked at an early age, tend to be unaware of their name, date of birth, or the whereabouts or names of family members. In some cases, children are forced to utilize various names with each migration and rarely do they utilize their birth names even if they are able to recall it. As a result, the trafficked child may grow to connect with their false names and symbolically to their “abused-exploited” self due to their limited insight and awareness of their non-abused self. Child trafficking narratives, as based on their psychotherapy participation in the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children, report that their birth names tend to emerge if they are acting “good” and are “perfect,” in comparison with their given names which they associate with negative feelings such as anger and shame, and which have served as the more dominant and powerful facet of their identity. They are also likely to vacillate back and forth between their abused-exploited and non-abused selves, as they lack a sense of a stable, safe, and nurturing environment to support the latter.

Another prominent trend among abuse victims is their tendency to repeat or re-engage in the abuse cycle through the phenomenon of “repetition compulsion” (Celani, 1994) via self destructive means or self exploitation. This pattern can also be applied to trafficking victims as an attempt by the child to avoid self annihilation and to preserve her or his sense of self, even if this is accomplished through continued abuse and exploitation. As children develop, they normally progress toward the stages of identity development. In the case of trafficked children, this stage is stunted due to early disruptions in attachment and repetitive exposure to loss, separation, and traumatic transitions and injuries. As a result, the child may regress back to familiar experiences, which in the case of trafficking, is the cycle of exploitation and abuse.

During the early stages of psychotherapy, child trafficking clients tend to reveal a tendency to self injure or injure others; a potential attempt to validate the existence of the self. For children who have been sexually exploited, the definition and value of self becomes equated with sexuality. Hence child victims attempt to reengage in sexualized behaviors to validate their presence and the only self worth with which they are familiar.

Recommendations for psychotherapy thus include the stage of identity integration as a recommended objective of treatment, following the initial stage of symptom stabilization. In working with child survivors of trafficking, utilizing verbal or non-verbal techniques to facilitate a coherent sense of self that includes acknowledging the exploited self and coping with the existing injuries and traumas, while developing the non-abused self. Building on the child's resiliency and strengths is also imperative during this stage. Therapeutic mechanisms that are central for identity building include reassurance, safety, and a solid therapeutic alliance, all of which will allow the child to explore both aspects of the self, towards a unified and integrated frame of self reference, which in turn paves the path towards the facilitation of interpersonal and cultural identities.

### *3.1.1. Interpersonal de-attachment versus reparation*

Abused and exploited children may also suffer injuries to their interpersonal world as they may experience mistrust, fear, and abandonment anxiety (Hunt & Baird, 1990). Children, who have been abruptly separated from their caregivers and moreover sold by family members, experience key developmental traumas and attachment disruptions. This impacts their ability to form positive and healthy relationships with others, and subsequently their future capacity for intimacy. On the one hand, trafficked children never had the opportunity to mourn the loss of caregivers, which may fuel a psychological state of idealization and fantasized images of reunification with family members, and an internalized rage and sense of betrayal, on the other hand. Leading to an interpersonal world shaped by extreme vacillations from the ideal to the devalued other.

It is also not uncommon for the trafficked child to establish rapport with the perpetrator (s). Narratives of child trafficking clients at the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children reveal conflictual interpersonal themes that reflect the child's confusion about the role of the perpetrator, especially if they are involved in testimony or other legal proceedings. Child victims may experience guilt and shame if they are to acknowledge the role of the perpetrator, and may begin to rationalize the perpetrator's actions and motives. From the child's perspective, the perpetrator, in the majority of cases, has served as the sole and consistent adult figure relative to the biological family. This may lead to further chaos in the child's interpersonal world, and de-attachment from future relationships due to fears over future losses and abandonment. This pattern of interpersonal relatedness deems understanding the child's perspective of the perpetrator and identification or lack thereof with their victimization as an important component of this stage (Gozdziak et al., 2006).

The therapeutic relationship thus is central for the interpersonal reparation stage as it provides the child with a new model for connection and intimacy. In working with exploited children, developing a trusting relationship with a non-exploiting adult figure that is consistent and safe is central (Hunt & Baird, 1990). Through this new relationship, the child begins to gradually internalize a reparative and alternative frame of interpersonal reference that will in turn empower them to establish relationships with other non-exploitative figures.

#### *3.1.1.1. Cultural dissociation versus reintegration*

The trauma of childhood trafficking poses not only an inter- and intra-personal threat, but a threat to the child's relationship with the surrounding culture and environment. Chung (2009) posited that in the case of Asian cultures, for example, female victims of trafficking may experience shame and guilt if they choose not to participate in commercial sex, as they may disobey the wishes of the family and may be unable to financially provide for family members. On the other hand, young female victims of trafficking, whose families may be unaware of their sexual exploitation, may be confronted with punishment and marginalization if they are to reunite with the family. This may render the child victim dissociated from a coherent cultural identity as they struggle with endorsing values and norms without feeling disempowered and exposed to further victimization.

Several of the child trafficking clients in psychotherapy at the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children have further illustrated this cultural identity conflict as they endorsed contradictory responses toward not only their families but their cultural roots. Certain clients projected anger and frustration, and a wish not to identify with their culture, while reporting an agonizing worry at not having a sense of cultural belonging or a value framework. Others displayed an over-identification with a cultural background and value system, without having the full insight or a conscious conviction.

Exploring the child's perceptions of culture and the surrounding environment is recommended to facilitate the child's sense of belonging and reintegration into a cultural context. Providing the child with alternative cognitive frameworks that emphasize cultural and social strengths will also contribute to a positive and integrated sense of self and others. Another implication for psychotherapy is to allow the child to process affect in relation to cultural factors, and mourn past and possibly future loss if they do not have the option of returning to their native country and reuniting with their family for safety and security reasons. During this stage, it is important for psychotherapists to also be cognizant of the "political countertransference" effect as they are grappling with emotionally laden subjects such as gender, culture, child rights, and social justice (Chung, 2009) so that personal beliefs or views do not impede or interfere with the process of therapy and the therapeutic alliance.

#### 4. Conclusion

Current global child trafficking trends suggest the need for future studies on specific developmental and traumatic effects on diverse samples. An integrated psychotherapy and social justice model that incorporates components of complex PTSD in addition to sociocultural and economic considerations is also in dire need. Future models of intervention are needed to prepare child victims for post-trafficking empowerment and integration be it if they are repatriated and reunified with families of origin or resettled in alternative placements. Social science specialists will also benefit from extensive training in developmental trauma, child human rights, and social justice advocacy, in order to effectively address and prevent the global and public health risks of childhood trafficking.

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