Sex Trafficking in the United States:
The Reality, the Complications, and the Hope for Improvement

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Background

Within the different categories of human trafficking, sex trafficking always seems to be viewed differently, for reasons more than one (Peters 2013). However, these inherent opinions that society has towards sex trafficking are actually complicating the issue of penalizing individuals, specifically the suppliers and customers, involved in the illegal sex trade. Currently, in the United States, the engagement in the act of prostitution is illegal, with the exception of certain counties in Nevada where legal brothels exist (Weitzer 2010, p.21). Yet, despite it being illegal, the U.S. is also ranked as the "world's second largest destination and market" for sexual exploitation of women and children (Ray 2011, p.124). Due to the nature of the situation, there is very little in-depth and accurate research done regarding sex trafficking (Weitzer 2010; Wilson 2007). Statistics range from 4 million to 27 million victims at any given time (Wilson 2007, p.11). The inadequate research being done and the variance among narratives has caused the United States to be less of a visible site for sex trafficking compared to other countries (Ray 2011, p.215), delaying the improvement and implementation of policies for the victims.

What is Sex Trafficking?

The formal definition of "sex trafficking" according to the Federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 states that sex trafficking is "Commercial sex [that] is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age" (Thakor 2013, p.281; "This is What Trafficking" 2013, p.56). In this situation, "commercial sex" is "any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person" (Kotrla 2010, p.181). The key part of this definition is the "coercion" element, which ultimately determines whether the sex act is prostitution or sex work (Thakor 2013,

p.282). However, the issue with this definition is that under this Act, victims of sex trafficking are also considered criminals since they are also engaged in the sex trade ("This Is What Trafficking" 2013, p.63).

Though some narratives depict victims to be illegal immigrants, it is important to note that there are actually more U.S. citizens that are victims of sex trafficking than foreigners (Ray 2011, p.219; Kotrla 2010, p.181). Often times, migrant women are actually engaging in the sex work, in places like massage parlors and brothels, voluntarily ("This Is What Trafficking" 2013, p.66-67). Thus, the large population of sex trafficking victims that are white and black teenagers (Wilson 2007, p.16) goes unnoticed from the public eye due to the heavy stereotyping of trafficking victims.

The main issue with sex trafficking, however, is the fact that is it is a form of modern slavery ("This Is What Trafficking" 2013, p.56; Ray 2011, p.213). The United States has had a long history of "moving things we don't want to see into places where we don't have to see it and therefore it doesn't exist" (Thakor 2013, p.278). Therefore, even though sex trafficking is recognized as a violation of human rights and even as an issue of racial discrimination (Ray 2011, p.213), not many Americans are aware that sex trafficking is a very common locally. There is also little that is seem to be done to attack the core root of the problem; victims are either contained within a particular area or are displaced in a different area, ultimately resulting in a "revolving-door dynamic" (Weitzer 2010, p.21).

The industry of sex trafficking is known to be very lucrative, with profits estimating between $32 billion and $91 billion, and slowly growing to become the world's largest illegal industry (Kotrla 2010, p.182; Nam 2007, p.1660). In fact, international criminals have gradually been shifting from drug and weapon trafficking because the profits are higher, risks are lower,

and because humans are just simply easier to move (Wilson 2007, p.20; Nam 2007, p.1660). The constant demand also fuels the constant supply. Male customers are attracted to these paid forms of sex for reasons such as wanting to fulfill their sexual needs/desires or due to certain physical characteristics, but also because of the "illicit nature of the act" (Wetizer 2010, p.245). Unless strong forms of legal action are taken and resources are made available for the victims, the high demand will continue fueling the profits for this illegal industry.

Path to Sex Trafficking

From the research that can be gathered, the pathway to sex trafficking for girls can be organized into 6 categories: (1) street prostitutes, (2) luring and recruitment, (3) the idolization of the "glamourous" lifestyle, (4) abductions, (5) promised opportunities, and (6) sold by family members. There is very little upward and downward mobility within the industry, meaning that the starting position for the victim would remain mostly the same for most of her career (Weitzer 2010, p.7). Most commonly, sex trafficking victims are runaways who resort to selling sex due to lack of resources, to support their drug habit, and just simply to survive (Weitzer 2010, p.9; Cullen 2013, p.345). These individuals seemed to face extensive physical and sexual victimization at home, escaping into the "streets" because of the lack of support and help from the state (Cullen 2013, p.341). Since these girls have "little else of value to trade" and are unable to enroll in schools or jobs from fear of detection by their abusive family members, they are encouraged to utilize the only resource that they have: their bodies (Cullen 2013). Even as these women grow older, since they do not possess the educational background nor marketable occupational skills that other women may have, they have no other option but to continue in these activities and to remain in the industry (Cullen 2013). Another important thing to note is

that crime is much more prevalent within the immediate vicinity of bars and gas stations (Wetizer 2010, p.21), which are areas that these runaway girls may be hanging by in, rather than in areas near strip clubs. This is because the security measures implemented by strip clubs, like bouncers and video surveillance (Weitzer 2010, p.21), helps prevent unsolicited activities from occurring, making it much more difficult for anti-traffickers to even pinpoint the area where these street prostitutes are actually working in.

Another common entryway into sex trafficking is through luring and recruitment by pimps. Pimps are individuals that "prostitutes minors or adults with force, fraud, or coercion" (Kotrla 2010). Girls are lured into sex trafficking through being offered "food, housing, and drugs," eventually exploiting them into prostitution (Wilson 2009). Sometimes, traffickers will even publish "legitimate appearing advertisements for employment" to lure girls into what is actually in the commercial sex business (Kotrla 2010, p.183), with the girls becoming too deeply involved before they can do anything about it. In the media today, pimps are usually depicted as begin "cool" (Kotrla 2010, p.183), causing an idolization and glamorization of the lifestyle. Girls will sometimes approach the pimps themselves in area shopping malls and/or through "pimp and ho" parties, basing their knowledge off of songs and television that depict the sex work lifestyle to be prosperous and glamorous (Wilson 2007; Kotrla 2010).

The method that we mostly hear about in the media, but is not as common in reality, is abduction and kidnapping of girls. The abduction of girls/women from foreign countries occur due to the low-status nature of the girls in many foreign cities ("This Is What Trafficking" 2013, p.57). These women are brought to the United States illegally, so their only option to earn a living wage is through sex work (Peters 2013, p.246). Moreover, these victims are not able to leave the sex trade industry because they cannot obtain a work permit, have their travel and

identity documents taken away, and are physically and mentally abused by their abductors (Peters 2013; Wilson 2007). Foreign girls/women are also dragged into the U.S. sex trade through being promised opportunities by well-respected individuals in their community (Wilson 2007). Sometimes, they will be promised legitimate jobs and even better life in the states, only to realize that they were only being lured into an illegal industry with no way out (Ray 2011).

Lastly, and sadly, many young girls are sold into prostitution by their family members. Not as common as the other methods but still prevalent, parents and even grandparents sell their children into sex trafficking in exchange for money and drugs (Wilson 2007, p.17). For foreign families, since women already have a low status associated with their identities, family members sell their children into the sex trade to improve their impoverished life conditions (Ray 2011, p.212).

Complications with Penalizing Sex Trafficking

To make matters worse, this hidden and closed industry has many reasons why it is difficult for outsiders to take legal action. For one, victims are usually give new identities, resulting in the police having to play the "name game," sometimes on multiple days at end, to track down the correct identity of the victims (Wilson 2007, p.21). Some of the victims that come from foreign countries that have entered the United States may not even have formal documentation, making it even more difficult for officials to identify these undocumented sex workers (Peters 2013, p.244-245). Another issue is that there are too many potential players in the human trafficking organization/circle, including organizers, middle-men, and even business operators (Wilson 2007). Especially during the transportation and transfer stages, it can be very difficult to prove that the person arranging the travel or accompanying the victim had the intent

to exploit them, since they can easily just claim that “someone paid them to take the victim from one place to another” and that “they had no idea what would happen to the victim” (McCarthy 2015).

Perhaps one of the most complicated elements regarding conducting legal and formal action against sex trafficking is the fact that state and local jurisdictions have different statues, despite federal definition. Sex work that may be considered obscene in one jurisdiction may not actually be obscene in another since each state and local jurisdiction defines sex trafficking differently (Weitzer 2010, p.18; Thakor 2013, p.281-282). Specifically for the foreign victims of sex trafficking, they will often time actually be considered immigration criminals due to their illegal immigration status rather than victims of trafficking (Ray 2011, p.219). Furthermore, the term “sex trafficking” itself actually comes in two forms: one simply being symbolic and thus cannot result in any legal repercussions, and the other being “severe,” triggering “benefits and legal action” (Peters 2013, p.233-234). The conflation of the term contributes to the conflation of prostitution and trafficking, creating confusion for even those attempting to implement the law (Peters 2013, p.233-234).

There also seems to be a constant demand for the sex trafficking market by officials in the criminal justice system and governors. Political and religious elites, police chiefs, and even prosecutors are known to purchase sex even when their job is to enforce laws against prostitution (Weitzer 2010, p.5). No longer is sex trafficking limited to sex abuse and refugee shelters; it is the “everyday lexicon” for politicians and even international aid organizations (Thakor 2013, p.279). Even the police and government officials are frequently paid large amounts of money to look the other way (Wilson 2007, p.24). This has deepened the distrust many victims have

towards law enforcement, causing them to be very unwilling to be witnesses against their traffickers and thus making victim testimony extremely difficult (McCarthy 2015, p.147-148).

Advancement of Technology/Media and its Effects

The shift towards increasing privatization and the advancement of technology has also made it worse for agencies to track down sex trafficking circles. Internet forums, chats, and classified sites have made ordering minors for sexual purposes frighteningly easy (Thakor 2013; Kotrla 2010). Exploiters no longer have to rely on their phones and personal connection to increase their network (Thakor 2013, p.287). In fact, certain sophisticated search engines allow for customers to even search images of girls based on race and ethnicity, allowing American men to even have virtual conversations with girls in Bangkok (Ray 2011, p.217; Small 2012; p.419). The anti-trafficking agencies met a major milestone when it was announced that Craigslist shut down their "Adult Services" category on Sep.4, 2010 (Thakor 2013). This section of the site was used to "sexually enslave children and young women," resulting in it being called the "Wal-mart of online sex-trafficking" (Thakor 2013, p.278-279). The problem with the internet is that as easy as it is to close them down, it is also easy to open new sites in a matter of a few seconds. Therefore, even though major websites like Craigslist may not offer these services anymore, there are countless other hidden websites that have still continued the trade. However, the advancement of technology and media is not only bad news. In fact, anti-trafficking agencies have been using media to coordinate and spread their messages. For example, the Swedish government distributed a film on sexual trafficking, titled *Lilja 4-Ever*, to NGOs in neighboring countries to help "educate vulnerable girls and women about the devious strategies of human traffickers" (Small 2012, p.415).

Steps to Take for Improvement

Though it may be easy to simply fine or penalize traffickers and exploiters, more focus and attention should be geared towards support and resources for the victims and in even penalizing the customers. Studies have shown that zoning and criminalization usually do not have much of an effect since it would not fix the other problems associated with street work, such as but not limited to violence and drug use (Wetizer 2010, p.25). Moreover, even if prostitution is legalized, there will always be an illegal market operating using people that are underage, HIV positive, and/or illegal immigrants – all of whom would not be protected under the law (Weitzer 2010, p.25). Instead, money and time should be spent on services and programs like safe houses/temporary housing, counseling, vocational training, and healthcare, for the victims, especially for underage victims (Weitzer 2010, p.28). The low status of the victims can be improved through increasing literacy and job programs, allowing them to develop transferable skills ("This Is What Trafficking" 2013, p.57).

More and more cities are also implementing "john schools," which are courses "designed to *shame, educate,* and *deter* the men from future contact with prostitutes" (Kotrla 2010, p.185; Weitzer 2010, p.31). By targeting the demand side of the trade, these programs are able to increase awareness for the harms associated with sex trafficking, and thus decrease the desire and demand for participation in the trade (Weitzer 2010, p.237).

Social workers also play a very key role in being the voice and support for this vulnerable population (Kotrla 2010, p.184). They can increase awareness programs at runaway shelters, alternative schools, and even juvenile detention centers, to help prevent young girls from joining the sex trafficking industry (Kotrla 2010, p.185). Organizations like Women Against Slavery, which was founded in 2009, raise awareness towards human trafficking through focusing on

education (Ray 2011, p.219), helping at-risk teens notice the signs and dangers associated with sex trafficking. Social workers also are valuable because they can help victims gain access to resources that they may not be aware of. Though it is unfortunately not as well-known among many, foreign victims specifically are actually able to apply for a special trafficking visa called the "T-visa," which can help them become eligible for federal benefits such as Medicaid and Food Stamps, and even receive a permit to legally work in the United States. However, the process to obtain a T-visa is quite extensive and requires the support from federal law enforcement agencies as part of the application (Peters 2013, p.247). The social workers, especially the street-level workers are "important decision makers," even more so than policymakers in our situation (Peters 2013, p.239-240), because they will directly involve/impact the victims' everyday lives.

Conclusion

As we have seen through our research and often times through the everyday interactions surrounding us, gender and sexuality are constantly one of the most controversial in American culture, making it extremely difficult for both victims to ask for help and for anti-traffickers to take action. Efforts to improve the current situation in the sex trafficking industry have been improving, such as enforcing global restrictions that require foreign NGOs that are receiving U.S. federal funding to sign the "anti-prostitution" pledge ("This Is What Trafficking" 2013, p.58). However, initiatives as such can also reinforce the criminalization of prostitution and even degrade the value of sex work in general. The ultimate goals are for society to first accept the fact that sex work is not all "low forms of work," since it is a very important source of income. Yet, it is also absolutely crucial that we spend time as a society informing/educating others about

the difference between general forms of sex work and sex trafficking, especially when those two words are often times used incorrectly and interchangeably in modern media. Sex trafficking is not only an immigrant issue nor isolated from reality. It really can happen to anyone, anywhere, which only makes it even more crucial for us to speed up and implement initiatives/resources to improve the situation.

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