

Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk

Volume 6
Issue 1 *Trafficking and Domestic Violence*

Article 9

2015

Commentary on "Human Trafficking and Domestic Violence: Etiology, Intervention, and Overlap with Child Maltreatment"

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Recommended Citation

LLoyd, Rachel (2015) "Commentary on "Human Trafficking and Domestic Violence: Etiology, Intervention, and Overlap with Child Maltreatment"," *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58464/2155-5834.1250>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/childrenatrisk/vol6/iss1/9>

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There are multiple intersections between trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) with domestic violence and child maltreatment. These intersections are only too familiar in the lives of the over 350 young girls and women we serve annually at GEMS, and inspired our founding in 1998. Yet the gaps in responding to these intersections, and missed opportunities for prevention and intervention, in our policies and systems only perpetuate the accumulation of violence and trauma in their lives.

Trafficking and CSEC *is* child maltreatment, and in 2001 a University of Pennsylvania study called it 'the most hidden form of child abuse', at the time it was also the most ignored. Fourteen years later, it's hard to say that it is an ignored issue; in the last two years domestic sex trafficking in the US has become the issue du jour with public awareness at an all-time high. Understanding of the problem however is often dominated sensationalistic images and simplistic solutions. The concept of trafficking is frequently seen as an issue largely separate from gender-based violence and child abuse when in fact it is part of the continuum of violence and trauma that children in the US, overwhelmingly children living in poverty, experience. When we fail to recognize and address the driving factors of domestic trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation and the long term impact of violence and abuse in the lives of victims and survivors, the increased awareness of the issue will only have a superficial impact on prevention, intervention and ultimately the significant reduction of the number of children and youth who are exploited in the commercial sex industry.

In order to address the broader framework of domestic violence, child abuse and CSEC/trafficking, it is critical to look at exactly where these issues intersect. It is easy to see how domestic violence is frequently enmeshed within victims' experiences of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation as pimps often portray themselves as a romantic partner where power and control dynamics set the stage for violence, isolation and exploitation and the psychological impact that has on victims that often manifest as fear, loyalty and trauma bonding.

What's discussed even less frequently is the aftermath as survivors of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking, (and full disclosure I include myself in this group), frequently experience domestic violence in their relationships after escaping or exiting 'the life'. The normalcy of violence and abuse within the commercial sex industry from both pimps and buyers means that survivors have little to measure their new relationships against for signs of healthiness and equity. When being beaten with a metal bar, put out on the streets, (or more commonly now, posted on the internet), and forced to turn over all your money at the end of a night has been your baseline, being pushed, or slapped 'a little', by someone who isn't selling you often feels like a marked improvement. It takes time for survivors to unlearn relationship patterns that were

frequently modeled in childhood and while ongoing support, particularly from other survivors, psycho-educational groups on healthy relationships and counseling are all vital through this process, it's important that practical resources aren't ignored. Being homeless, being poor, being unemployed makes women, and particularly survivors of trafficking and CSE, even more vulnerable to continued abuse. Programs that look to 'rescue' victims of trafficking may be able to address the immediate crisis but long term healing and independence is contingent on empowering survivors to take control of their own lives, to have sustainable economic options and to be able to break cycles of abuse for themselves and their own children. Living wage employment, affordable childcare, affordable housing and access to education are all important and frequently overlooked tools in this work and while perhaps not as sensational or exciting as a program that rescues girls from the street, have far more long term impact in decreasing vulnerability to violence.

We must now turn to the long term impact, while we have unprecedented momentum and attention on this issue. The factors that make children vulnerable occur over long periods of time and long before they appear on the radar of law enforcement or social service providers as 'trafficking victims'. Therefore it's critical to address the issues that come much earlier for the overwhelming majority of children and youth recruited into the commercial sex industry; witnessing domestic violence and experiencing child abuse within their own homes and families. GEMS work over the last 17 years with victims and survivors of CSE has documented that over 70% of our members have been involved in the child welfare system, and over 90% have experienced child abuse, whether sexual abuse, physical abuse or neglect, prior to their recruitment into the commercial sex industry.

Andrea Dworkin once said that "incest is boot camp for prostitution" and it's true that the lessons learned as a child both witnessing and experiencing various forms of violence and abuse make children and youth so much more vulnerable to later exploitation. Girls learn that violence is a normal part of a relationship and therefore far more susceptible to their pimp's declarations of love, even as he consistently hurts them. Boys learn that women are deemed subservient and of lesser value and therefore far more likely to see purchasing or even exploiting a girl or woman as acceptable behavior. And all children learn from unstable and abusive households that authorities aren't to be trusted, that they have no physical and personal boundaries, that secrets must be kept and that pain is to be suppressed. The lessons are so well taught and the trap is so well set that when listening to stories of survivors' childhood trauma it is perhaps less surprising that young people end up being so vulnerable to the lures of exploiters but that more of them don't. In over 18 years of working with thousands of commercially sexually exploited girls and young women, I can count on one hand the girls who didn't seem to be perfectly groomed by their childhood traumas and abuse.

Their stories are so familiar and their path so predictable that when they reach the part where they 'met a boy', 'met a man', 'ran away from a group home' that as the listener I often feel like 'of course that's what happened next, how could it not?'

But the truth is, if our systems, our communities, our society worked differently more abuse and trauma wouldn't have to be the inevitable result. For every pimp that comes into contact with a vulnerable child, there were multiple adults along the way that noticed the child maltreatment, heard the fights between the adults in the home, responded to a 911 domestic violence call, responded to a child welfare complaint, saw signs of neglect when the child came to school, saw signs of abuse when the child attended church and more. Children who end up being trafficked and exploited were rarely hidden from the world for the first decade of their life, they were surrounded by adults, by community, by systems and institutions and yet somehow they slipped through almost every gap. If we are serious about addressing trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children then we will have to begin by closing those gaps and preventing the vulnerability to exploitation in the first place.

It can be hard to get people engaged at this point around domestic violence and child abuse, we feel as if we addressed those issues two or three decades ago and now we have laws and public awareness campaigns and funding streams and shelters. All of which is a huge shift from 30 years ago and yet we still have an epidemic of domestic violence and child maltreatment. If we are going to see a significant decrease in the commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking of children, we will need to learn some lessons of what has worked and what hasn't in the last few decades as we've worked to address children's exposure to violence and abuse and we'll need to take the long view so that in a few years when the attention has moved on to another 'new' issue and the interest has faded we're not left with short term fixes that do little to address the trajectories of violence that begin in children's lives and continue as they become adults and have their own children. We'll need to move from a sensationalistic approach and an increasingly criminal justice approach to one that is grounded in the reality of the daily experiences of the children and youth we serve and that addresses the intersections of not only domestic violence and child abuse but how poverty, racism, gender inequity and larger social issues ensure that some children are at much, much higher risk for recruitment into the commercial sex industry than others. And we'll need to start much earlier, before children are identified as trafficking victims, before they've been recruited, before they run away from that group home. Prevention must go beyond simply giving a workshop to teens on '10 ways to spot a trafficker'. Real prevention of childhood violence and maltreatment, (including trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation) requires us to continue and strengthen decades long work on early childhood development, best practice interventions, child welfare reform, reducing

poverty and most critically make significant investments into building and supporting healthy and safe communities that support healthy and safe families and children.