Human Trafficking Is More Than Sex Trafficking and Prostitution: Implications for Social Work

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Abstract
The human trafficking discussion has focused primarily on women and children who are trafficked for sexual exploitation. However, as social workers confront the issue, they require an understanding of the problem that also acknowledges individuals who are forced to work in other areas. This article critically examines the current discourse on human trafficking because the sole focus on women and children diverts attention from the study of trafficking within the context of globalization and the exploitation of labor. It analyzes the term human trafficking, particularly how it became linked to antiprostitution campaigns, and suggests guidelines for a framework that is grounded in social work values.

Keywords
feminist theory, globalization, human trafficking, sexual trafficking, social justice

Human trafficking encompasses the transportation and subjugation of persons for financial gain. It is an extremely profitable enterprise, with global earnings estimated at more than US$31 billion (Belser, 2005). Considered a modern form of slavery, human trafficking constitutes a human rights violation and a global public health crisis (Gajic-Veljanoski & Stewart, 2007). Although methodological problems have influenced the collection of reliable data and the production of accurate statistics (Goździak & Bump, 2008; Laczko & Goździak, 2005), it is estimated that worldwide between 4 million and 27 million individuals have been victims of trafficking or forced labor at any given time (U.S. Department of State, 2007).

Although human trafficking has received increased attention in the scholarly literature (Goździak & Bump, 2008), the topic has not been widely discussed in social work. This situation is surprising, since the profession’s mandate to advance human rights and social and economic justice (Addams,
Reichert, 2003; Reisch & Andrews, 2002; Van Voorhis & Hostetter, 2006) places social workers in an ideal position to address the problem. As a call for action, Hodge and Lietz (2007) and Hodge (2008) discussed the human trafficking epidemic and presented ways in which social workers can intervene at the individual, programmatic, and policy levels. Their discussion on human trafficking centered on women and children who are trafficked for sexual exploitation.

However, as social workers address the complexities that are associated with human trafficking, they require a systematic understanding of the problem that moves beyond sex work and prostitution. According to the United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking UN-GIFT (International Organization for Migration, 2009, p. 19), trafficking victims are commonly found in such industries as “construction, manufacturing (e.g., textile, metal, wood), industrial fishing and fisheries, agriculture, domestic servitude, mining, quarrying, food processing, forestry, leather and tanning, carpet-weaving, [and] livestock.”

This article critically examines the current discourse on human trafficking to craft a framework that is broader than a focus on women and children who are trafficked for sexual exploitation, which we believe diverts the study of human trafficking within the context of a globalized market economy and labor exploitation. This narrow focus limits social workers’ ability to understand the profession’s role not only in the identification and assistance of trafficked victims but also in prevention efforts, and thus to effect change at the micro-, mezzo-, and macro levels. We analyze the history, metaphors, and assumptions contained in the phrase human trafficking, particularly how it became linked to antiprostitution campaigns, and use the analysis to suggest a framework that is more grounded in the social work values of human rights and social and economic justice.

An Overlooked Population

Research has tended to favor the study of sex trafficking over other forms of labor exploitation, despite evidence that many trafficked individuals are forced to work in a variety of industries (Goździak & Bump, 2008). The focus on sexual trafficking and prostitution has been influenced by highly politicized ideological debates on the definition of human trafficking. Such debates have affected inclusion and exclusion criteria for research projects and have often resulted in studies that have been funded by favored political agendas (Stolz, 2007; Weitzer, 2007). Activist-driven studies have commonly focused on women and girls who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation (Goździak & Bump, 2008).

However, trafficked individuals are forced not only to engage in prostitution but also to produce commodities that are sold in global markets, such as grains, coffee, cocoa, sugar, cotton, and gems (Bales & Cornell, 2008). Indeed, more than half the trafficked adults in the United Kingdom who were referred for posttrafficking services from April 2009 to June 2011 were forced to work in industries other than sex work (United Kingdom Human Trafficking Center, 2012). Among the children who were referred for services during the same period, the largest group consisted of those who were trafficked for labor exploitation. Children are at a particular risk of human trafficking; they can be trafficked for sexual exploitation, begging, organ harvesting, and domestic servitude (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2009).

The focus on women and children who are trafficked for sexual exploitation can affect the identification and assistance of other trafficked individuals, particularly men. For example, the National Human Rights Commission in Thailand denounced the labor exploitation of 100 fishermen from the Samut Sakhon province. These men were kept in captivity for 3 years, working without pay in Indonesian waters. They were deprived of proper food and water, and, as a result, 39 men died of malnutrition. Those who returned home had vitamin deficiencies; had problems seeing, hearing, and
walking; and were emotionally disturbed. Regrettably, they were not considered victims of human trafficking because, until recently, the Thailand Social Development and Human Security Ministry included only women and children as target groups for human trafficking. Furthermore, under Thai labor laws, they were not protected because they were working outside Thai territory for more than 1 year (Bhumiprabhas, 2007).

Depending on the type of work that trafficked individuals are forced to perform, they can present with health problems, such as malnutrition, dehydration, respiratory problems, high blood pressure, skin infections, accidental injuries, hypothermia, or frostbite (International Organization for Migration, 2009), and psychological trauma and stress that are comparable to reactions found in victims of torture (Zimmerman et al., 2003, 2006a, 2006b). Because of the narrow understanding of the health consequences associated with the various types of forced labor, individuals who come in contact with health care providers may not be identified as victims of trafficking and thus may be deprived of proper protection and assistance. Moreover, despite the existence of assessment tools that can be used to identify victims of human trafficking who are forced to work in a number of areas (see UNODC, 2008b), the focus on identifying victims has often been limited to those who are forced into prostitution or sex work (Goždziak & Bump, 2008).

**Historical Roots**

The focus on female victims of trafficking has historically been associated with antiprostitution campaigns in England. Josephine Butler, a prominent late 19th-century British feminist, linked human trafficking to sexual exploitation through her campaign against the “White slave trade.” Her campaign began as an outgrowth of her fight against the legalization of prostitution in England (Summers, 2008). Butler, who founded the International Abolitionist Federation in 1875, inspired a series of international conventions and treaties to combat human trafficking, which at that time were exclusively related to sexual exploitation (Ray, 2006). By associating human trafficking solely with prostitution, however, the conventions and international agreements that followed Butler’s campaigns overlooked other types of labor and sexual exploitation, such as mail-bride arrangements or domestic servitude that came with an expectation of sexual favors (Ray, 2006).

Human trafficking continued to be an important issue for the women’s movement, and by the 1970s, the violence against women (VAW) movement included human trafficking in its agenda as another manifestation of the ubiquitous violations of women’s rights in a patriarchal society (Ray, 2006). Butler’s position on prostitution was still endorsed by some of the second-wave feminists’ viewpoints on the sex industry, who considered sex work an expression of unchallenged societal values that oppress women (Shrage, 1989) and a form of sexual violence, regardless of the level of agency of the sex worker (Soderlund, 2005). Lerner (1986) discussed prostitution from a feminist historical perspective, arguing that to understand the historical evolution of prostitution, it was necessary to consider “its relationship to the sexual regulation of all women in archaic states and its relationship to the enslavement of females” (p. 124).

Furthermore, some of the women’s rights campaigns of the 1990s focused on issues of VAW in the Third World, particularly sexual violence. As Miller (2004, p. 18) proposed, “sexual violence was effective in this cause because it seemed to provide means to make the gender-specific content of the violence visible to key human rights bodies and actors.” Activists rallied against militarized prostitution in Southeast Asia, sex tourism, and the mail-order bride business. Soon afterward, human trafficking became part of the agenda of the international women’s movement, addressed in international women’s conventions and forums, such as the 1975 World Conference on Women,

The U.S. Policy Perspective

The VAW perspective on trafficking became more politically influential during the administration of President George W. Bush and continued Butler’s abolitionist focus on human trafficking as sexual exploitation. Although the VAW perspective was successful in drawing attention to the exploitation of trafficked women, it overlooked other forms of violations of women’s rights in the context of forced labor. The VAW perspective overemphasized the powerlessness of trafficked women and promoted a rhetoric of the “victim subject.” Its aim was to attract the sympathy of the media and the government and to offer a fictitious unifying language for women across cultures (Kapur, 2002; Soderlund, 2005). Viewed through the VAW lens, trafficked women in the Third World are seen as victims of their own culture who need to be rescued and educated (Kapur, 2002).

Although the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) and President Bill Clinton signed the bill in October 2000, hearings on the act continued between 2001 and 2005 because the reauthorizations of 2003 and 2005 gave lobbyists the opportunity to raise new issues regarding sex work and prostitution (Stolz, 2007; TPVA, 2000; Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, 2003, 2005). In 2003, the reauthorization of the act included, along with other amendments,

> a restriction on the awarding of grant funding for programs and organizations for the protection of and assistance to victims. Specifically, no grant funds were to be used to promote, support, or advocate the legalization of prostitution. (Stolz, 2007, p. 321)

These amendments were promoted by an alliance of some religious right groups and some radical feminists, who, despite their opposing views on many social issues, agreed on their position against prostitution (Weitzer, 2007).

Furthermore, the U.S. National Institute of Justice (2007, p. 4) required applicants who sought funding to support research on human trafficking to certify that they did not “promote, support, or advocate the legalization or practice of prostitution.” Similarly, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID, 2003) did not fund international organizations that fought the spread of AIDS unless they had a policy that explicitly opposed prostitution and sex trafficking.

The UN Perspective

Prior to the U.S. TVPA, the UN had attempted a compromise (see Defeis, 2003–2004) in the antiproduction–antihuman trafficking debate through its protocol to prevent, suppress, and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children, one of the supplementary protocols in the 2000 UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crimes that gathered in Palermo, Italy. Usually referred to as the UN Palermo Protocol, it had to be ratified by 40 countries to become an instrument of international law. By December 2007, 116 nations had ratified this protocol that established the first internationally agreed-upon definition of human trafficking. According to the UN Palermo Protocol, the definition of human trafficking has three key elements:

1. the act—what is done: “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons”;
2. the means—how it is done: “threat or use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability, or giving payments or benefits to a person in control of the victim”; and
3. the purpose—why it is done: “exploitation, which includes exploiting the prostitution of others, sexual exploitation, forced labor, slavery, or similar practices and the removal of organs” (UNODC, 2000b, article 3).

The consent of the victim is irrelevant where any of the means just mentioned have been used. When the victim is a child, defined as a person under age 18, the means are irrelevant when the purpose is exploitation of a minor (UNODC, 2000b). By including forms of trafficking beyond sexual exploitation, the UN Palermo Protocol went further than the antiprostitution instruments created in prior antitrafficking conventions and distinguished trafficking from other forms of illegal immigration (Fredette, 2009).

**Media Images, Metaphors, and Assumptions**

While the UN Palermo Protocol provided a structure to understand the various forms of forced labor, the media still focused primarily on the trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation. This focus was intensified by the popular and political interest in the topic, which was expressed in articles, books, films, and a wide variety of artistic forms. The stories told by journalists, writers, filmmakers, and performing artists were compelling narratives of the traumatic experiences that trafficked persons had suffered. Such stories played a pivotal role in the sensitization not only of the general public but also of policy makers (Stolz, 2007). In the past decade, an increasing number of cinematic productions have portrayed human trafficking in a variety of film genres, including such documentaries as *The Day My God Died* (Levine, 2003), *Sex Slaves* (Bienstock, 2006), and *Hummingbird* (Mosher, 2007); full-length crime–drama films, such as *Holly* (Collmer, 2006), *Eastern Promises* (Webster & Lantos, 2007), *Trade* (Amritraj & Heller, 2007), and *Taken* (Hoarau, 2008); and television miniseries thrillers, such as *Human Trafficking* (Doyle & Dominik, 2005). Filmmakers have brought individual stories of trauma, violence, and resilience to public awareness. In some cases, the conditions experienced by individuals before they were trafficked are insinuated by images of poverty and political unrest in the victims’ countries of origin.

However, seldom are viewers exposed to a more multifaceted narrative on human trafficking, one that takes into account the economic, political, and social consequences of globalization. Most of the narratives did not discuss the structural factors that increased an individual’s risk of being trafficked and presented stereotyped depictions of the victims to promote the symbols and agenda of a moral crusade (Kapur, 2002; Weitzer, 2007). This approach discounts the narratives of trafficked individuals who frequently left dire living conditions. In a review of nine studies that investigated human trafficking in the United States, Logan, Walker, and Hunt (2009) found that the majority of trafficked individuals were impoverished immigrants. Countries and regions with poor economic and social conditions provide traffickers with opportunities to access and recruit individuals who are extremely vulnerable to exploitation (UNODC, 2008a). Furthermore, unless the “rescued victims” are sheltered by a nongovernmental agency because of illness or remain under the patronage of a victims’ protection program, little is told about their lives after trafficking, and they often go back to the obscurity from which they came (UNODC, 2008a).

In contrast, Aaron Woolf’s documentary, *Dying to Leave* (Hilton, 2003), presents a more multilayered story on human trafficking. *Dying to Leave* tells the stories of five migrant workers, men and women, who were trafficked into labor exploitation and prostitution, their journeys spanning 16 countries. Although the documentary shows the harrowing experiences they endured while being transported and enslaved, it also discusses the conditions that made them vulnerable to being trafficked and the difficulties they experienced after they were rescued from the traffickers. Woolf’s
(2003) aim was to raise awareness by showing that trafficking victims are not just in secluded places like brothels and sweatshops but are among us, traveling with us, and perhaps providing the services or producing the goods that we consume.

Moreover, some efforts to reduce human trafficking have favored the use of fear-based metaphors in mass media awareness-raising campaigns in the areas that supply trafficking victims, on the assumption that if the potential victims knew the dangers that lay ahead, they would not expose themselves to such risks, even when the conditions in the supply regions may be so desperate that nothing could look worse than their present state (UNODC, 2008a). This kind of prevention campaign relies on providing information about the predatory practices of traffickers who target women and children to exploit them in prostitution, increasing the risk of HIV infection. For example, a study on community perceptions of trafficking in Nepal found that the country’s Information, Education, and Communication sector used materials that linked human trafficking with prostitution and HIV infection to discourage women from leaving their villages in search of earning a livelihood. Repatriated trafficked victims were often perceived as “immoral” because of their presumed involvement in prostitution, mainly in Indian brothels, and ostracized because of the fear of HIV contagion (Mahendra, Bhattarai, Dahal, & Crowley, 2001). UN-GIFT (UNODC, 2008a, p. 64) criticizes the narrow lens of such prevention efforts, as they overlook “broader social problems such as illiteracy, poor standards of health or under- or unemployment” and other structural factors that make communities more vulnerable to trafficking.

**Critique of the “Victim Subject”**

The discussions of the broader social problems that increase vulnerability to trafficking are rarely discussed, since the current discourse has been on the trafficked individual’s identity as a “victim.” The critique of the victimization rhetoric in relation to antitrafficking campaigns has come mainly from authors in the fields of social and political science (e.g., Aradau, 2004; Kapur, 2002; McDonald, 2004; Ray, 2006; Sharma, 2005; Weitzer, 2007). Analyzing the problem through a combination of Third World feminist theory and postmodernist frameworks, such authors have disagreed with the central image proposed by certain antislavery and antitrafficking campaigns that have presented trafficked persons as “innocent victims” who need to be rescued from the traffickers and reunited with their communities of origin.

Sharma (2005) contended that the “victim subject” fails to recognize the agency, however constrained, of illegalized migrants who have been trafficked to work in a variety of areas. It also fails to “understand how processes of capitalist globalization and the consequent effects of dislocation and dispersal shape the mobility of illegalized migrants” (p. 88). Sharma argued that by presenting migrant women as passive victims of traffickers, one diverts attention from the globalized capitalist practices that deprived such workers of their livelihoods in the first place. She argued that this kind of rhetoric operates as a “moral panic” (p. 89), which justifies the use of regressive practices to enforce the control of immigration.

According to hooks (1984/2000, p. 26), feminism strives to stop “sexist oppression” by engaging in a fight “to eradicat[e] the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels, as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires.” hooks’s definition provides a unifying thread to the work of first-wave feminists to advance women’s civil rights, the struggles of the second-wave feminists to promote women’s liberation and equality, and the efforts of Third World feminists to bring about awareness of the intersection of gender discrimination with the oppressions that are linked to race, class, and imperialism.
Despite the common purpose of feminism proposed by hooks (1984/2000), feminists often had difficulties establishing a common political agenda, in part because of their diverse understandings of what constitutes the “ideology of domination” and how the “reorganizing of society” should be accomplished. These dissimilar and often conflicting approaches to theory and action are also manifest in the debate on human trafficking. On one hand, abolitionist feminists believe that there is no distinction between women who are smuggled or trafficked into sex work because prostitution is intrinsically the victimization of women, regardless of their level of agency as migrant workers. On the other hand, Third World feminists and some liberal and socialist feminists have proposed that there should be a distinction between trafficking and migration and that sex work should be treated as a type of labor and discussed within the context of capitalist globalization, exploitative labor practices, and imperialist interventionism. These conflicting perspectives on prostitution have shaped the narrow definition of human trafficking, influenced the debate on trafficking at the national and international levels, affected the inclusion and exclusion criteria in research projects, and influenced the approaches of antitrafficking campaigns in the media (Goździak & Bump, 2008; Stolz, 2007; Weitzer, 2007).

Historically, feminists have had contrasting views on sex work and prostitution and have offered opposing solutions to the problem, ranging from the decriminalization of sex work proposed by liberal feminists to its prohibition supported by radical feminists (Saulnier, 2009). The human trafficking debate offered a new battleground for the prostitution debate, confounding the boundaries between sex trafficking and sex work. This narrow focus on sex trafficking and prostitution diverted the attention from other forms of exploitation of trafficked individuals and hindered the discussion of the role of globalized markets in the creation of condition of vulnerabilities to trafficking.

Conclusion

As social workers develop clinical, programmatic, and policy interventions to contend with human trafficking, they should adopt a framework that recognizes all forms of forced labor. This framework, grounded in postmodern and feminist theory, moves beyond the metanarrative that promotes the rhetoric of the victim subject and a moral crusade to rescue victims and views human trafficking as a form of global labor exploitation that also contributes to poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, poor standards of health, and political unrest. Furthermore, it acknowledges that both men and women are vulnerable to trafficking and that the migration labor does not always imply international border crossing. That is, trafficking can take place within the same country, from one state or one province to another, and from cities within the same region.

The main purpose of the framework is to help social workers avoid the common pitfall of conceptualizing human trafficking from the “post facto end of the spectrum” (Ray, 2006, p. 923). In other words, to address the problem in a comprehensive way, social workers should acknowledge the structural inequalities that preceded the trafficking as well as the push and pull factors that led many trafficked individuals to leave their countries in search of better living and working conditions. It is also important to recognize the level of agency of trafficked persons. Many are impoverished migrant workers whose basic human rights were already denied (Ray, 2006). Ironically, many become victims of labor exploitation in an attempt to regain control over their own livelihoods (Ray, 2006).

Social workers in direct practice can play a pivotal role in identifying trafficked persons in such settings as emergency rooms, health clinics, and shelters. Since there are no distinct physical and emotional symptoms by which clinicians can identify trafficked persons, knowledge of industry-related morbidity and conditions of vulnerability can help facilitate identification through comprehensive psychosocial assessments. For example, a man who comes to an emergency room with dehydration, respiratory problems, high blood pressure, and skin infections and reports that he works
in agriculture should be further assessed to identify whether he is a victim of trafficking. Or a social worker who meets with a woman who, under the watchful company of a “family relative,” seeks medical care for an injury and provides explanations that are inconsistent with the injury could be identified as a victim of domestic servitude. It is important to recognize that some trafficked persons may not be ready to leave their situations out of fear of retaliation against them or their family members. In addition, some may feel pressure to pay their debt bonds, fear immigration or law enforcement officials, be confused about their status as trafficking victims, or have lost their capacity to make decisions. In some cases, the trafficked person may want to stay out of loyalty to the trafficker. When interviewing suspected trafficking victims, clinicians should use a trauma-informed approach (Zimmerman, 2006a, 2006b) and instill a sense of safety and hope, speak with clients privately, and use language interpreters when necessary. Furthermore, social workers should be mindful that the person who presents with the client as a “friend,” “relative,” or “coworker” could be the trafficker.

This framework suggests that future research on human trafficking needs to acknowledge the structural inequalities that promote the exploitation of labor. Studies that examine the psychosocial consequences that are associated with various forms of forced labor, not just sex trafficking, are also needed. It is also important to study the efficacy of interventions with trafficked persons, as well as the effectiveness of prevention efforts and awareness campaigns. This knowledge will allow social workers to identify trafficked individuals who appear at health care facilities and guide policy makers in their prevention efforts. Given the controversial nature of the topic, researchers should disclose their position on the trafficking debate during their epistemological discussions and outline their inclusion and exclusion criteria in relation to the recruitment of subjects. Finally, the profession’s mandate to advance human rights and social and economic justice calls for social workers to be active participants in the discussion of human trafficking. To do so, social workers should explore the issue through a more nuanced lens and, at the same time, invest in resources that produce knowledge to guide policy and practice.

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