EFFICACY OF TRAUMA-FOCUSED THERAPY FOR HUMAN TRAFFICKING SURVIVORS

Helen Ehi Eweka, PhD[1], Osamuyi Aghasomwan Bello, PhD[2]
[1&2] *Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria.*
Emails: [1]*helen.eweka@uniben.edu* & [2]*osamuyi.bello@uniben.edu*
Correspondence: *osamuyi.bello@uniben.edu*

Abstract
Human trafficking is a significant global issue, especially in developing nations. This paper explored the efficacy of trauma-focused therapy for human trafficking survivors, addressing the complex psychological and emotional aftermath. Human trafficking subjects victims to severe trauma, including physical violence, sexual exploitation, and psychological manipulation. Trauma-focused therapy is crucial in managing symptoms such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and dissociative disorders. Drawing on Herman's (1992) trauma-informed theory, the paper emphasized recognizing trauma's pervasive impact and providing a safe, supportive environment for recovery. Trauma-informed therapy assists survivors in understanding their experiences, developing coping mechanisms, and reducing the likelihood of re-traumatization. The paper also reviewed barriers to accessing therapy, including stigma, lack of awareness, and structural obstacles like economic instability and legal repercussions. It further examines socio-economic and cultural factors facilitating human trafficking, such as poverty, unemployment, weak legal systems, and cultural practices that devalue women. It also extends to the profound effects on survivors, highlighting the need for comprehensive, culturally competent, and trauma-informed interventions. The paper underscoreed the importance of tailored therapeutic approaches for trafficking survivors, promoting their reintegration and well-being. This paper, therefore, advocated for enhanced awareness, improved access to services, and stronger enforcement of anti-trafficking laws.

Key words: *Human trafficking, Trauma-informed therapy, Human trafficking survivors, re-traumatization, Dissociative disorder.*

Introduction

Human trafficking (HT) is a critical global issue that spans sociology, anthropology, social work, clinical psychology, and law enforcement. Survivors endure severe physical, psychological, and emotional trauma while struggling to access food, shelter, legal aid, and psychological care (Toney-Butler, Ladd, & Mittel, 2024). The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 defines human trafficking as the recruitment, harboring,

or transportation of individuals through force, fraud, or coercion for labor or services, including debt bondage, slavery, or involuntary servitude (Toney-Butler et al., 2024). Over 50 million people worldwide are victims of modern slavery (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022). HT involves coercion, force, or deception for exploitation, including forced labor, organ harvesting, and sexual exploitation (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2000). Victims face abusive conditions, physical violence, and severe isolation, leading to long-term psychological and emotional harm (Gordon, Salami, Coverdale, & Nguyen, 2018; Ottisova, Smith, & Oram, 2016; Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). Many suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, anxiety, depression, dissociation, and developmental challenges in youth (Stanley et al., 2016). The ILO (2018) estimates that 20.9 million individuals worldwide are affected, often through coercive recruitment methods (United Nations, 2020).

Victims are trafficked for forced labor, including factory work, sex work, domestic servitude, and criminal activities. Research highlights high rates of physical and sexual abuse before and during trafficking, contributing to severe health issues (Oram, Stöckl, Busza, Howard, & Zimmerman, 2012). Many survivors struggle with reintegration due to socioeconomic instability, stigma, and legal barriers (Gordon et al., 2018; Nodzenski et al., 2020). While legal frameworks exist to protect victims (Gallagher, 2010), challenges in accessing justice and essential services persist. Survivors often interact with law enforcement, immigration, healthcare professionals, and NGOs (Dell et al., 2019), yet mental health services addressing their trauma remain inadequate (Bryant & Landman, 2020). Despite the profound psychological effects of human trafficking, research on trauma-focused therapy remains limited. Many survivors develop PTSD, anxiety, depression, and dissociative symptoms, yet access to specialized mental health care is inconsistent due to stigma, legal barriers, and insufficient resources.

This study explores the causes and consequences of human trafficking, emphasizing its impact on survivors' mental health. It also examines challenges in combating trafficking and assesses the accessibility and effectiveness of trauma-focused therapy. By identifying barriers such as financial constraints and social stigma, this research offers insights into improving mental health support for survivors. The findings aim to inform policymakers, mental health professionals, and organizations, enhancing trauma care and aiding survivors in recovery and reintegration. This study is grounded in trauma-informed theory, which provides a framework for understanding and addressing the psychological impact of trafficking and trauma-informed care.

The Trauma-Informed Theory

The trauma-informed theory, proposed by Herman (1992), is pivotal for understanding the care required by individuals who have experienced trauma. Herman emphasizes the importance of recognizing trauma's pervasive impact and providing safe, supportive environments for recovery. Trauma-informed therapy is critical for clinicians working with patients who have suffered abuse and violence. Its goal is to help patients understand the effects of their experiences and develop coping mechanisms to manage symptoms. Treatment focuses on trauma recovery and co-occurring diagnoses that arise from trauma. Trauma-informed therapy also empowers patients to advocate for other abuse victims and promotes independence, reducing the likelihood of re-traumatization.

Mental health practitioners must differentiate between acute and chronic trauma when treating sex trafficking victims. Acute trauma often results from a single event, while chronic trauma stems from prolonged, repeated abuse, whether physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological. Herman (1992) distinguished PTSD from complex PTSD (CPTSD), noting that chronic trauma leads to symptoms like constant arousal, hyper vigilance, and a persistent fear of re-victimization. Complex trauma, as described by Herman (1992) results from repeated, protracted traumatic events involving betrayal. Symptoms include insomnia, psychosomatic issues, dissociative symptoms, relationship difficulties, and personality changes. Establishing a therapeutic relationship with CPTSD patients, such as human trafficking victims, is challenging due to their experiences of betrayal. Trauma-informed treatment acknowledges the difficulty patients face in discussing their trauma, which can lead to treatment discontinuation. A strong therapeutic relationship significantly improves attendance and engagement in therapy.

Victims of Human Trafficking

According to the International Labour Organization, one in four victims of human trafficking is a child, often found in child welfare and juvenile justice systems or homeless youth shelters (International Labour Organization, 2021). In 2016, one in six runaways was a victim of sex trafficking, with 86% previously in foster care or social services (Polaris, 2016). Within 48 hours on the street, runaway adolescents are often solicited by traffickers (Jordan et al., 2013). Traffickers lure homeless children into trafficking rings, subjecting them to severe abuse, leading to numerous deaths and diseases acquired through sexual exploitation (Litam, 2017).

Victims of human trafficking vary in age, ethnicity, social background, education, and origin. Vulnerable groups include undocumented immigrants, runaway and homeless adolescents, trauma and abuse victims, refugees, and the impoverished. Individuals are trafficked for various reasons, including domestic service, agricultural labor,

commercial fishing, textile industry, construction, mining, industrial employment, and minor criminality (U.S. Department of State, 2021; Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). While men are victims in all trafficking areas, they are disproportionately subjected to forced labor, while women and children are predominantly sexually exploited (International Labour Organization, 2021). Factors like gang involvement, childhood maltreatment, poverty, and substance abuse increase trafficking risks (De Chesnay, 2013; Moore et al., 2017; O'Brien, 2018).

Sex trafficking involves exploiting women in various contexts, often with many players involved. Despite laws, sex trafficking persists due to insufficient enforcement and involvement of powerful individuals (Nnadi, 2013). Child labor disrupts education and violates human rights, with child slavery being a violation of Nigeria's Constitution (Ajagun, 2012). Debt bondage, or bonded labor, is a common yet least-known form of labor trafficking, where victims are trapped in an endless cycle of debt (Ajagun, 2012).

Challenges in Accessing Trauma Therapy for Human Trafficking Survivors

Human trafficking is a severe violation of human rights that inflicts extensive trauma on its victims, including physical violence, sexual exploitation, psychological manipulation, and forced labour. Access to trauma-focused therapy is essential for survivors to address their complex trauma symptoms and begin healing. However, several barriers impede access to these crucial services.

1. **Stigma and Shame:** A significant barrier is the pervasive stigma and shame associated with human trafficking experiences. Survivors often internalize guilt, self-blame, and worthlessness, preventing them from seeking help or disclosing their experiences (Logan, Walker, & Hunt, 2009). Societal misconceptions and stereotypes further contribute to the stigma, causing survivors to fear judgment, rejection, or retaliation if they disclose their trafficking history (Chuang et al., 2012).

2. **Lack of Awareness and Knowledge:** Another barrier is the lack of awareness and understanding of human trafficking among the general population and service providers. Many individuals do not recognize the signs of trafficking or understand the dynamics of exploitation, making it difficult for survivors to seek appropriate support (Greenbaum, 2014). Healthcare providers may lack training in trauma-informed care, limiting their ability to identify and respond to survivors' needs (Hopper, Bassuk, & Olivet, 2010).

3. **Structural Barriers:** Survivors face numerous structural barriers, including economic instability, lack of affordable housing, limited transportation, and fear

of legal repercussions (Reid, 2011). Economic dependence on traffickers or lack of financial resources hinders access to mental health services (Zimmerman & Yun, 2013). Additionally, fear of law enforcement or immigration authorities, especially for undocumented survivors, creates significant obstacles (Kalt, 2011).

Causes of Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is a pervasive and complex global issue driven by various interrelated factors. Understanding the root causes is essential to effectively combat this crime and support survivors through interventions such as trauma-focused therapy. The following are the primary causes of human trafficking.

1. **Economic Instability and Poverty**: Economic instability and poverty are significant drivers of human trafficking. Individuals from impoverished backgrounds are more vulnerable to traffickers who exploit their desperation and lack of opportunities. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), economic hardship makes people susceptible to promises of employment, education, or a better life, leading them into trafficking situations (UNODC, 2020). In regions with high unemployment rates and limited economic opportunities, traffickers can easily lure victims with false promises of financial stability.

2. **Political Instability and Conflict**: Political instability and conflict create environments where human trafficking can thrive. Wars, civil unrest, and political turmoil displace populations, making them prime targets for traffickers. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) highlights that conflict zones often lack effective law enforcement and social services, allowing traffickers to operate with impunity (IOM, 2018). Displaced individuals, particularly women and children, are at heightened risk of exploitation during and after conflicts.

3. **Social and Cultural Factors**: Social and cultural factors also play a crucial role in human trafficking. Gender discrimination, cultural norms that devalue women and girls, and practices such as child marriage contribute to the trafficking of individuals for sexual exploitation, forced labor, and other forms of exploitation. The Global Report on Trafficking in Persons by the UNODC notes that traffickers often exploit societal norms and gender inequalities to manipulate and control victims (UNODC, 2020).

4. **Lack of Education and Awareness**: A lack of education and awareness exacerbates the problem of human trafficking. Individuals who are unaware of the tactics used by traffickers are more likely to fall victim to exploitation.

Additionally, communities that lack awareness about the realities of trafficking are less equipped to identify and report suspicious activities. Educational programs and awareness campaigns are critical for preventing trafficking and empowering potential victims to seek help (Polaris, 2019).

5. **Demand for Cheap Labor and Sexual Exploitation**: The demand for cheap labor and sexual exploitation is a significant factor driving human trafficking. Industries such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work often rely on trafficked labor to cut costs and maximize profits. Similarly, the commercial sex industry fuels the trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation. The U.S. Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report emphasizes the role of consumer demand in perpetuating trafficking networks (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

6. **Weak Legal Frameworks and Corruption**: Weak legal frameworks and corruption hinder efforts to combat human trafficking. In many countries, inadequate laws and lax enforcement allow traffickers to operate with little fear of prosecution. Corruption among law enforcement and government officials further undermines anti-trafficking efforts. Strengthening legal frameworks, improving law enforcement training, and addressing corruption are essential steps in combating trafficking (UNODC, 2020).

Effects of Human Trafficking Among Youths

Human trafficking is a global crime with devastating effects on victims, particularly young people. It impacts over 130 nations, creating profound social, political, and economic consequences (Moore et al., 2017).

On an individual level, trafficked youths experience extreme physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. They suffer from prolonged trauma, leading to physical injuries, disabilities, and even death. Many develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and difficulties concentrating. Children face stunted development and struggle with attachment and social skills. The stigma and rejection from families and communities worsen their trauma, making recovery uncertain (Katherine et al., 2016).

Health effects include exposure to violence, forced drug use, starvation, and limited healthcare. Victims, especially those in the sex trade, face high risks of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV/AIDS. The lack of medical access results in unsafe abortions and high maternal mortality rates (O'Brien, 2018).

Socially, victims often experience isolation, fear, and an inability to reintegrate into their communities. Many trafficked individuals are unable to return home, and children of victims may end up in orphanages, further disrupting family structures (Rafferty, 2017). Legally, trafficked youths often find themselves in unlawful situations. Instead of being recognized as victims, they may be arrested, deported, or imprisoned, while traffickers go unpunished (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017).

The economic impact is significant. Many enter trafficking to improve their financial situation but end up in debt bondage. Governments spend substantial resources on prevention, victim support, and prosecuting traffickers. The loss of human capital and tax revenue weakens national economies while criminal organizations profit (Gezie et al., 2018).

Politically, human trafficking complicates migration policies and human rights enforcement. Stricter border controls sometimes fail to identify victims, exposing them to further harm. Trafficking also fuels organized crime, undermining national security (Nodzenski et al., 2020).

Psychologically, young victims suffer from emotional distress, low self-esteem, and depression due to forced labor and abuse. This loss of human potential hinders national development (US Department of State, 2017).

Societally, trafficking weakens family ties, fuels crime, and creates economic disparities. Victims struggle with social reintegration, and affected countries face reputational damage, discouraging good governance and economic growth (Kiling & Kiling-Bunga, 2019).

Challenges in Combating Human Trafficking

Human trafficking poses a major threat to global security, stability, and economic development. Political corruption is a key driver, particularly in Nigeria, where despite anti-trafficking laws, corruption weakens enforcement. The country's wealth is concentrated among a small elite, leaving a significant portion of the population in poverty. In 2010, 60.9% of Nigerians lived in absolute poverty, making many vulnerable to traffickers' false promises of better opportunities (World Bank, 2014; UNODC, 2021).

Corruption within public institutions, particularly the police, further exacerbates trafficking. Reports indicate that law enforcement officials accept bribes from traffickers and sometimes extort money from victims. In Edo State, 42% of interactions with police involved bribery, enabling traffickers to evade justice (Ajagun, 2012; NAPTIP, 2008).

Poverty is another major driver, as traffickers prey on individuals desperate for work. Many trafficked women are unemployed or underemployed, and economic hardship forces them to migrate in search of opportunities. This is closely tied to government corruption, which limits job creation and economic stability (Zasha & Effiong, 2017). Unemployment is particularly acute in Edo State, where a lack of formal employment pushes many into precarious work, making them vulnerable to traffickers.

Cultural factors also play a role. Practices such as primogeniture, where the eldest son inherits family property, leave women economically disadvantaged. Gender inequality remains deeply rooted, despite the influence of Christianity and Islam. Women's economic marginalization makes them easy targets for traffickers (Okafor et al., 2020).

Education disparities further contribute to trafficking. Gender biases favor boys, leading to high dropout rates among girls. Limited educational opportunities leave women without the skills necessary for stable employment, increasing their susceptibility to exploitation (Ikhimwin & Obarisiagbon, 2020). I

Lastly, illiteracy worsens the situation, as many families perceive education as unimportant or unaffordable, leaving children especially girls vulnerable to trafficking (Osezua, 2016).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Trauma-focused therapy is essential for aiding human trafficking survivors worldwide, who face significant physical, psychological, and emotional trauma that hinders their reintegration into society. This paper evaluated the effectiveness of trauma-informed interventions, finding that trauma-focused therapy provides a structured and supportive environment that acknowledges and addresses the complex trauma experienced by survivors. Key components for effective therapy include safety, trustworthiness, and empowerment. However, significant barriers hinder access to trauma-focused therapy. These include stigma and shame associated with trafficking experiences, lack of awareness among the general population and service providers, and structural barriers such as economic instability and fear of legal repercussions. Addressing these barriers is crucial for enhancing the accessibility and efficacy of trauma-focused interventions. Comprehensive awareness campaigns and training programs are needed for healthcare providers, law enforcement, and the general public to recognize the signs of human trafficking and understand the dynamics of exploitation. Reducing stigma through public education and advocacy is essential for encouraging survivors to seek help. Addressing structural barriers, enhancing legal protections, expanding trauma-focused services, and fostering collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and

community groups can significantly improve support for survivors.

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