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Obstacles to Resettlement for Human Trafficking Victims

Victims of human trafficking face a great deal of hardships. After having encountered unbelievable exploitation at the hands of their traffickers, they must escape in order to attempt to live normally once again. Their escape seems to be just the beginning in a long, arduous journey. Seeing as these victims have experienced such a horrific past, what must be the obstacles they face when attempting to resettle? Socially, victims face stigmas: American society largely isolates them due to prejudice regarding immigration and sex trafficking. Their local communities reject them, and they have difficulties connecting to locals; thus, their reintegration is limited both in home and host countries. Their unstable mental health continues to limit reintegration; victims have difficulties coping with psychological trauma. Economically, victims face just as many issues, especially when considering long-term stability. Resources may meet their immediate needs when considering food, shelter, and medical care, but the lack of sustained support limits their reintegration. Overall, organizations' failure to meet long-term needs such as education and career development has created a new sub-set of poor immigrant workers that American society ignores and isolates. Many also succumb to re-trafficking, showing a complete failure of economic reintegration. This combination of social and economic difficulties illustrates the issues that human trafficking victims face when attempting to resettle into society after escaping. Understanding these issues is necessary for the U.S. government, non-governmental organizations, and average American citizens to develop resources that could aid victims in their reintegration process.

Human trafficking victims face a plethora of social and economic issues when trying to reintegrate into society after escape. Before examining these issues, gaining an understanding of forced labor and sexual exploitation is necessary. Human trafficking is a widespread problem both in the United States and throughout the world. When considering sex trafficking in particular, the American demand is a result of a culture that promotes the sex industry through various forms: legal and illegal prostitution, strip clubs, and the phone sex businesses. Simultaneously, social structures relating to historical gender issues induce migration, female subordination directs women in the sex industry specifically, poverty allows for general migration into countries with greater wealth and prospects, and a lack of opportunity creates a situation ideal for recruitment and exploitation.

After having a general knowledge of the supply and demand for trafficking within the U.S., various facets of isolation continue to explain why this issue is such a phenomenon. Victims do not contact trafficking hotlines when captors manipulate them to the point where they cannot call for help. Similarly, victims do not call aid hotlines when kept away from external connections such as telephones. Since traffickers threaten and abuse them both physically and verbally, many will not risk escaping to aid centers. Furthermore, victims might not be able to understand the awareness campaigns and resources available when they face language difficulties. Many also lack the economic self-sufficiency to risk the temporary loss of food, shelter, and clothing when connecting to resources. Finally, these victims do not trust legal systems that treat them as criminals rather than victims. These difficulties in escape are just a part of a larger, extremely challenging journey victims face in reintegrating socially and economically.

SOCIAL

These hardships begin when examining social reintegration. Victims face a lack of social support in their resettlement into society due to common stigmas. Respondents in one study mentioned the prevalence of bigotry against human trafficking victims in particular. Simply put, Americans are judgmental regarding immigrants, as there is much animosity in the U.S.: “They are not just victimized by traffickers, society/community doesn’t see them and can’t help them” (Logan, Walker, and Hunt 16). Americans often doubt the reason why immigrants are present in the country. Many see foreign victims as people who are taking domestic jobs and going to lengths in order to evade deportation. Another interviewee in the study portrays this idea: “Public backlash against immigrants is a huge issue because the public mentality is that they are making the human trafficking stories up to get a visa” (Logan, Walker, and Hunt 16). Overall, this judgment reinforces social stigmas and isolation that limit victims’ resettlement.

In addition to prejudice regarding immigration, sex victims in particular face further bias when society labels them as prostitutes. Wickham found that women and children feel as though society ignores and segregates them. Society often treats victims as willing participants while failing to condemn the traffickers who force women into prostitution. Thus, many feel humiliation and isolation from locals, their families, and resources meant to help them (Clawson, Dutch, Salomon, Goldblatt, and Grace Lisa). Many victims feel discrimination and prejudice from service providers: sex workers feel oppressed by rehabilitation centers, which treat their past experiences with moral condemnation. Due to these feelings of shame and guilt, many former sex workers will outright reject rehabilitation and reintegration programs and stay in the sex trade (Wickham 15). Altogether, Americans tend to view sex workers as immoral and dirty (Wickham 13). Although the development for greater self-esteem, confidence, and

empowerment is essential for those recovering from exploitation, the reality of social isolation and condemnation shows that victim reintegration is limited (Wickham 11-12).

Not only does society isolate victims, but their families and cultures also limit their reintegration. Victims will often hide their history, as they do not tell their families back home or their acquaintances in the U.S. about their experiences in forced trafficking (Brennan 1596). When attempting to return to their communities, their families and past connections often refuse to accept victims even though traffickers forced many into exploitation (Wickham 3). Many treat victims as social pariahs; this isolation can extend to more extreme consequences including condemnation to severe poverty, community rejection, or even death (Wickham 15). Also, female victims face limited marriage prospects: Men from their home communities view these women as damaged goods and refuse to marry them (Wickham 8). When considering social isolation from their local communities, families, and prospective spouses, victims find difficulties surviving and recovering; as a result, this penury and discrimination limits resettlement (Wickham 8).

Another huge factor in reintegration encompasses connecting to locals. Language differences is one key issue, as the majority of victims do not speak English, cannot communicate with locals, and are isolated from those who may help them in the reintegration process (Clawson, Dutch, Salomon, Goldblatt, and Grace Lisa). Most formerly trafficked victims never connect to those around them or to other victims, with whom they could share stories or offer advice, support, or inspiration: “Most formerly trafficked persons have never met another individual who also had been in forced labor” (Wickham 16). Many programs conclude that victims are more likely to recover and reintegrate when interacting with other survivors of violence and exploitation. Through these connections, victims develop a larger sense of purpose

in their own lives and can envision a future without violence and exploitation (Wickham 12). A former victim named Eva became an inspiration to another: “Seeing Eva dressed in her blue scrubs and carrying a book bag provoked this fellow group member to remark on how amazing Eva was and how she, too, was looking into different degree programs” (Brennan 1597). Although victims find that connecting with other survivors and locals is extremely helpful, the small number of these networks limits reintegration.

The psychological effects related to human trafficking also limit victims’ ability to resettle in society. Due to their past exploitation, which often included beatings and rape, victims have to cope with mental burdens and instability (Brennan 1595). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is common in victims of human trafficking, as they remember experiences involving threats, serious injury, or even death. The Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) measured PTSD-associated symptoms to find the percentages of trafficked women who ranked their symptoms as severe. The results prove that trafficking victims face the symptoms that greatly limit their ability to interact normally in society: 75% had recurrent thoughts/memories of terrifying events; 52% felt as though the event is happening again, 54% had reoccurring nightmares, 60% felt detached/withdrawn, 44% were unable to feel emotions, 67% felt jumpy or easily startled, 52% had difficulty concentrating, 67% had trouble sleeping, 64% felt on guard, 53% had outbursts of anger relating to irritability, 61% avoided activities that reminded them of the traumatic or hurtful event, 36% could not remember part or most of traumatic or hurtful event, 65% felt as though they didn’t have a future, 58% avoided thoughts or feelings associated with the traumatic events, and 65% had sudden emotional or physical reactions when reminded of the most hurtful or traumatic events (Williamson, Erin, Nicole Dutch, and Heather Clawson). These severe symptoms prove that women have difficulties

bearing the mental burdens from their past experiences, which greatly limit their social interaction and resettlement.

In addition to PTSD, depression is a common issue. Victims of human trafficking often suffer from anxiety and mood disorders including “panic attacks, obsessive compulsive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and major depressive disorder” (Williamson, Erin, Nicole Dutch, and Heather Clawson). One study found that survivors of human trafficking reported the following anxiety and depression symptoms: 91% experienced nervousness or shakiness inside, 61% had terror/panic spells, 85% reported fearfulness, 95% experienced feeling depressed or very sad, and 76% had hopelessness about the future. Victims suffering from this type of trauma have trouble establishing interpersonal and intimate relationships (Williamson, Erin, Nicole Dutch, and Heather Clawson). Seeing as victims cannot relate to others due to mood disorders like depression, reintegration becomes a huge obstacle when the commonality of psychological disorders is present.

ECONOMIC

Not only do victims face social issues in reintegrating into the society around them, but the lack of sustained economic support greatly limits their resettlement. Human trafficking victims have many immediate needs. Essentially, they escaped from exploitation without anything except for the clothes on their backs. Therefore, they have “no way to feed themselves, nowhere to live, and no transportation” (Logan, Walker, and Hunt 17). Organizations attempt to meet victims’ short-term needs of food, shelter, and medical care. Resources largely succeed in providing victims with these emergency necessities, as Polaris Project offers the following regarding case management for victims: Child-related assistance, clothing and material assistance through donations, criminal justice and legal advocacy, document obtainment

assistance, educational support, employment assistance, housing search support, food assistance, government benefits acquisition, and social services advocacy. Furthermore, this organization aids victims by providing temporary individual and group therapy as well as housing (Polaris Project 2012a). Safe Horizon is another organization that offers similar services: “Safe Horizon provides direct services for victims that include finding shelter, counseling, and referrals for educational and job training, as well as legal and social service advocacy that provide more protection for victims” (Safe Horizon 2012a).

In addition to providing services and resources for victims’ emergency needs, these two organizations offer shelter. Polaris Project offers transitional housing for a period of 6-24 months and prides itself on the services offered (Polaris Project 2012a). The transitional housing played a fundamental role in a victim named Claudia’s recovery: “She was able to focus on other needs without having to worry where she was going to live the next day” (Polaris Project 2012b). Polaris Project also assisted Gabriella in finding an apartment for her and her young daughter (Polaris Project 2012c). The organization provided transitional housing where a victim named Sabine could feel safe and secure (Polaris Project 2012d). With the help of Safe Horizon, a victim named Saida moved into a shelter before returning home to South Africa (Safe Horizon 2012 b). The organization also found Angela a room in one of their domestic violence shelters (Safe Horizon 2012c).

Although these organizations offer emergency needs and transitional housing, non-governmental organizations have a huge problem funding long-term programs and shelter for victims. Bales and Soodalter offer commentary on this issue, as they conclude that victims need a safe place to stay because the sense of security and comfort are essential in their recovery, resettlement, and reintegration (100). After escaping and seeking services for their rescue, there

is a lack of available space for victims: “There are only thirty-nine beds allocated for sexually-exploited children—in the entire country” (Bales and Soodalter 100). Law enforcement and service providers have reached the same conclusion. They find that overall housing is limited since providers limit stays to periods of 15, 30, or 60 days. Furthermore, transitional housing is often limited to 18 months. The ASPE reveals the issues with these limited stays when considering reintegration: “This is not an adequate amount time to establish relationships with victims or provide sufficient services to meet their longer term needs” (Clawson, Dutch, Salomon, Goldblatt, and Grace Lisa). Seeing as victims lack long-term housing and services, the likelihood that they will go back into trafficking increases exponentially; therefore, victims cannot economically reintegrate without secure housing (Bales and Soodalter 100).

In addition to victims finding flaws in housing, short-term medical care continues to limit economic reintegration. Most service providers are able to supply basic medical services such as physicals, gynecological exams, screenings, and basic dental care. In contrast, specialized medical treatment poses problems. Program resources cannot keep up with specialized care for acute, long-term needs: “Diabetes, cancer, and other illnesses, including prescriptions that were part of the treatment, were often cost prohibitive and in some cases, exhausted program resources.” Also, serious and costly dental procedures, such as root canals and extractions, were difficult to obtain (Clawson, Dutch, Salomon, Goldblatt, and Grace Lisa). Virtually all victims need physical and mental attention, and organizations and victims constantly request more nurses, doctors, and other medical professionals. Seeing as many victims lack financial stability after escape, they desperately need low- or no-cost mental health care providers as well (Bales and Soodalter 259). Victims have little access to long-term medical care; therefore, their

decreased likelihood of being physically fit and able to work limits their ability to hold stable jobs and resettle economically.

Finding a job without long-term housing and medical care is difficult to imagine; in addition, long-term needs such as education and career and skill development continue to encompass economic difficulties for victims. Learning English is a necessary skill for many victims. In order to make a living and survive in the United States, the ability to speak, read, and write in English is crucial (Bales and Soodalter 258). Those who wish to acquire new skills or degrees have to balance paying for school and going to work and classes (Brennan 1601). A former victim named Carmen tries to achieve this balance: “Her daily concerns were like those of her migrant roommates working low-wage jobs: how to pay bills while also sending remittances to her parents; how to find time to attend ESL classes while she worked the night shift cleaning hotel rooms; and how to make new friends so far from home” (Brennan 1582). Overall, economic resettlement is extremely difficult for victims, as many have to learn how work and develop needed skills simultaneously.

The lack of social mobility also limits victims’ economic reintegration. Victims face time and budget restraints. A victim from Malaysia is the sole financial provider for herself and two children. She constantly worries about stretching her paycheck: “There is no room for any extras. Her salary as a child-care provider barely covers the family’s monthly expenses: rent, food, and her hour-long commute by bus and metro to her job” (Brennan 1600). Due to these restraints, those who are attempting rehabilitation cannot escape poor living standards comparable to prisons. Although they would like to move forward and prosper, victims face chronic financial insecurity because they lack extensive social networks outside of their work. Thus, many do not have the necessary connections in the host country that would match them

with jobs with better wages, greater security, and opportunities for mobility (Brennan 1601). Overall, the inability of victims to achieve their economic goals creates a new sub-set of poor immigrant workers (Brennan 1600) who cannot reintegrate into society.

Numerous decisions by both sex slaves and sex workers to reject rehabilitation and reintegration and remain in the sex trade further depict difficulties in economic reintegration to the point of complete failure. Despite the experiences of violence and exploitation, some women and children view the sex trade as the only means of survival for themselves and their families (Wickham 15). One victim explains this situation: “It took a lot of strength to not return to it. You get used to the money! And, life is very expensive here” (Brennan 1603-1604). Due to financial instability, victims may put themselves in exploitative situations again and are re-trafficked. Many trafficking victims cannot find employment that would provide for their families and repay former debts because of a lack of qualifications. Some victims re-connect with past traffickers out of sheer desperation to provide for themselves and their loved ones (Adams). Seeing as traffickers have the ability to exploit victims after escape, victims of human trafficking face a huge problem in attempting to survive and find financial stability in host countries.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the social and economic difficulties victims face after managing to escape gives the country insight into the issue of resettling victims of human trafficking. Socially, American society limits victim reintegration with stigmas. There is much prejudice regarding immigration and sex trafficking. This discrimination continues in victims’ local communities, as they often reject victims. Simultaneously, trafficking victims have difficulties connecting to locals within host countries. These victims’ unstable mental health also limits reintegration, as

they have difficulties coping with psychological trauma and trusting resources. Economically, victims have trouble with long-term stability. Resources may meet their immediate needs, such as food, shelter, and medical care, but the lack of sustained support limits their resettlement. Overall, these victims' inability to attain education and career development creates a new sub-set of poor immigrant workers that lack economic stability and social mobility. Also, there is a complete failure of economic reintegration when traffickers re-exploit victims. In conclusion, trafficking victims are unable to fully recover, resettle, and reintegrate because of this combination of social and economic difficulties they face after escaping.

The U.S. government, non-profits, and American citizens need to understand victims' social and economic hardships in order to successfully aid them in resettlement. Trafficking victims feel social stigmas relating to discrimination, distrust, and mental health issues; thus, awareness and media campaigns would help in informing society of the difficulties victims face in order to decrease ignorance and rejection. Sponsor programs would also increase understanding and aid (Bales and Soodalter 261). Providing sustainable resources would help these victims to reintegrate economically. Increasing funding for both government and non-profit resources relating to immediate and long-term housing, physical and mental health services, education, and case management would further benefit victims (Bales and Soodalter 264). Furthermore, average citizens could provide a variety of skills and services as well. Offering languages skills and professional skills relating to medical and law fields; donating clothes, equipment, and money; and buying survivor-made goods would greatly help these victims resettle and sustain themselves economically (Bales and Soodalter 258-259). Overall, the government, various organizations, and citizens have the ability to aid in the reintegration of human trafficking victims after understanding common hardships.

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