Guest editorial

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Sex trafficking and violence against women

Violence against women is recognized as a human rights and public health issue worldwide ([World Health Organization, 2017](#)) and manifests itself in various forms, such as intimate partner violence, domestic violence, sexual violence, child abuse, child marriage, reproductive coercion and human trafficking among others ([UN Women, 2020](#)). Human trafficking, particularly sex trafficking, as one of the manifestations of violence against women, is often a gendered crime, because victims are primarily women and girls ([UNODC, 2018](#)). Sex trafficking violates the fundamental human rights of women and girls, but owing to its illegal and hidden nature, it is challenging to estimate its true prevalence across the world and therefore to fully understand the dynamics among all parties involved in this second largest criminal industry.

To tackle violence against women and sex trafficking particularly, growing awareness, the advancement of knowledge, continuous discussion at international and national levels and aggressive regulatory measures are required by world leaders and global communities. Empirical research on sex trafficking is very limited. This special issue is dedicated to shedding light on the current state of scholarly work, bringing together different perspectives at various levels and moving the understanding of these issues forward theoretically, empirically and practically. The papers draw on current research, practice and policies focused on sex trafficking and violence against women. The first paper “Minor sex trafficking of girls with disabilities” ([Franchino-Olsen *et al.*, 2020](#)) focuses on one of the youth groups targeted by sex traffickers because of their vulnerability. This article is notable for its contribution to the current body of knowledge as the research focusing on girls with disabilities is very limited; but using a nationally representative US sample, this article establishes that this group of youth is at heightened risk to become sex trafficking victims.

The second article “The integral role of relationships in experiences of complex trauma in sex trafficking survivors” ([Evans, 2020](#)) explores the nature of complex trauma and its impact on human trafficking survivors and how this intersects with human relationships. Through qualitative interviews with female survivors, the study investigates the effect of trafficking on identity, sexuality, relationships and the search for services after surviving the experience. Of particular importance are the voices of survivors expressed throughout the research design, which will potentially inform survivor-driven interventions focused on the healing process for human trafficking survivors.

The third paper entitled “Multiplicity of stigma: cultural barriers in anti-trafficking response” ([Fukushima *et al.*, 2020](#)) explores stigma as a societal and cultural barrier that human trafficking survivors face at micro, meso and macro contexts, as well as systems of oppression. Informed by survivor voices, the article highlights the role of anti-trafficking responders in the multiplicity of stigma toward human trafficking survivors and urges them to re-evaluate their organizations’ policies and procedures that may further exacerbate human trafficking survivors’ trauma.

The following paper “Legislative discrepancies: an analysis of Missouri’s current policies and its need to decriminalize and protect victims of human trafficking” ([Kappler and Richie-Zavaleta, 2020](#)) draws the attention to the present gap in the legislation through analysis of

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the current policies in the case study of Missouri, USA. The authors discuss the significant role of legislation in supporting the rehabilitation of the individuals who experienced inhuman abuse and how laws can contribute to further harming the survivors if legislations fail to see them as victims.

The paper highlights the need for the application of public health models and human rights principles in strengthening the legal protection of human trafficking survivors.

In the fifth article “Raising awareness of human trafficking in key professional fields via a multidisciplinary approach” (Awerbuch *et al.*, 2020), the authors evaluate the impact of educational intervention conducted among professionals who participated in a full-day conference focused on raising awareness and knowledge on human trafficking. The study’s findings indicate that the baseline knowledge of the medical community vs the legal community may differ, and the authors conclude that the educational initiatives may serve to bridge the gap. This type of research is necessary for supporting the allocation of resources to the professionals working with survivors on the education of trafficking.

The next paper in this collection “A very lucrative liquid: the emerging trade in human milk as a form of reproductive exploitation and violence against women” (Steele and Hernandez-Salazar, 2020) sheds light on a rapidly emerging global issue, the sale of human milk, by viewing it as an exploitation of women’s bodies. This viewpoint paper takes the perspective that human milk sale is gender-based violence and reproductive exploitation that may lead to the trafficking of women. The authors argue that human milk, a female-produced substance, is an issue of gender justice and equality and calls for state leaders to critically analyze this emerging exploitation of women and provide support for women with breastfeeding and maternity.

The final article of the special issue entitled “A transgender girl’s experience: sexual exploitation and systems-involvement” (Hammond *et al.*, 2020) provides a narrative of the challenges of a transgender girl who experienced commercial sexual exploitation while under the institutional system’s care. Through this case study of a transgender girl using the gender minority stress theory as a theoretical framework, the authors illustrate the structural barriers this girl faced at each step of the service delivery system, while highlighting the unmet needs of transgender youth experiencing sexual exploitation. The study has significant implications for multidisciplinary clinical interventions, which must account for the unique needs of this vulnerable youth population.

Together, these papers contribute to the understanding of sex trafficking through the reflection of the survivor voices and demonstrate gaps in current anti-trafficking efforts and legislative actions, challenges associated with structural systems and vulnerable populations. The past evidence with complex public health issues indicate that there are multiple factors that play a role and therefore factors at multiple levels should be addressed to eradicate the problem. This special issue has given timely attention to this human rights ailment, and we are grateful to the Series Editor, Dr Theo Gavrielides, for providing the platform and support to this special issue dedicated to sex trafficking as an issue of violence against women.

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